

Institutions in Flux

BRIGID HYNES-CHERIN, BHC Trans, San Francisco

The institutional issues facing the transportation industry as it approaches the 21st century reflect the dichotomy inherent in all change. On the one hand, the specific issues mirror the nature of the times and deserve solutions that take advantage of the characteristics of these times. In order to be relevant to the types of decisions that will have to be made in the future, institutions must reflect the changing demographic, technological, environmental, and economic factors that will greatly influence lifestyles and travel of the 21st century (1, p. 1). On the other hand, the underlying nature of the issues is no different from that of issues that have always faced us, and the solutions will undoubtedly parallel ideas from the past.

STATE OF THE ART

Responding to Change

Over the years, transportation institutions have shown themselves to be remarkably adaptable in responding to new issues and challenges. To some degree, this adaptability is due to the strong impetus that federal requirements have on transportation planning and implementation. For example, the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA) took advantage of the death of the Interstate system as a primary federal funding focus to bring about the birth of flexible funding. But even without the federal impetus, institutions have had to acknowledge and respond to societal changes, such as the shift in population and employment from central city to suburbs to exurbs, and technological advances.

Meyer noted a number of evolutionary trends in transportation planning, all of which have a corresponding impact on the institutional responses needed to address these issues. Some of the more relevant trends include a shift

- From an emphasis on methods and data in support of capital programming to improved information on a wide-ranging set of impacts for a wide variety of capital, operation, pricing, lifestyle, and land use decisions;
- From a focus on efficiency of highway networks and corresponding levels of service to multimodal systems operation and board performance measurement;
- From acceptance of land use patterns as a given and not part of the solution set to the use of growth management tools in connection with corresponding transportation policies as a major strategy;
- From user benefits and costs to equitable distribution of benefits and costs within the concept of community; and

- From a focus on the question of what should the planning or transportation agency do to solve the transportation problem to that of what should all of us do (1, pp. 2–5).

Besides being impelled by outside forces, the changes that have occurred have generally not happened overnight. More often than not institutional, not technical, obstacles have hampered our response to change.

The more difficult and vexing challenges have always been the institutional ones of achieving effective decision making among different advocacy groups and power sharing among federal, state, and local elected officials, and bringing together and synthesizing vastly different sets of values and priorities. Unfortunately, given the nature of change, and the upheaval inherent in institutional change, it is likely that this pattern will continue in the future. (2, p. 46)

ISTEA and the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) have served and will continue to serve as the necessary external impetus for change in the next millennium. Among the key changes affecting institutional roles and responsibilities for transportation planning that are embedded in ISTEA and TEA-21 are the following:

- The increased role and power of metropolitan planning organizations in programming and financing,
 - The discipline imposed on decision making through the requirement that transportation improvement programs be fiscally constrained,
 - The increased opportunities for citizen involvement,
 - The focus on customer-based planning,
 - The role reversal in program objectives with the federal interest shifting away from investing in new capital to maintaining the existing system and the state and local interest focusing less on system preservation and more on capital investment as it becomes viewed as the main beneficiary of such investments,
 - An increased federal acknowledgment of modal alternatives (transit, pedestrian, bicycles) as providing a larger contribution to national objectives of choice,
 - Efficiency and social equity, and
 - A federal focus on policy rather than technical research (3, pp. 23–24).

The strong focus on institutional change is necessary to achieve the underlying goals of ISTEA and TEA-21. Strong, healthy institutional relationships have always been the key to successful implementation of new ideas. Only if we know who we are and where we are going can we achieve success. Too often in the past, agencies have been too busy doing what they always did to do anything different, and as a result nothing changed. But the 1990s has seen an increasing focus on agencywide strategic planning, where the agency clearly articulates its vision and mission statement and adopts measurable goals and objectives for achieving them. The strategic plan provides the framework for delivering the agency's product.

Challenges and Contributing Factors

Whereas the need for change may be irrefutable, how and when change occurs and how effective it is when it does occur are often problematic.

As noted earlier, most agencies are so focused on delivering a traditional, time-honored product that they are not able to see the bigger picture. In addition, with limited resources and ever-increasing demands, it is difficult to consider devoting these resources to what may even be viewed as competing products. Yet what an agency can accomplish is often defined not by what changes it makes internally but by how well it works with others. John Donne's adage "No man is an island" applies equally well to agencies trying to plan and implement transportation services. The adage focuses on the idea that all players must work together for the common good. Without this focus, an agency's definition of success may be defined narrowly by how it delivers its product (process) rather than by the bigger picture of how well it accomplishes its ultimate mission (results). A win-win attitude is critical to working with others; without it the real loser tends to be the overall transportation system.

The need for intergovernmental coordination is reinforced by both the nature and impact of transportation decisions. Examples are boundless. For instance, while freight issues often have local effects, the main beneficiaries are often located not only outside the region but even outside the state (4, p. 13). Conversely, new welfare-to-work programs shift service decisions to the county level, but the interface between jobs and housing occurs on a regional basis (5, p. 21). Likewise, air quality impacts respect no physical boundaries, yet regulations hold the county of impact entirely responsible for solutions. Furthermore, land use power is concentrated at the lowest level of government, but regional transportation systems are expected to solve any transportation problem created by these decisions. More important, the use of transportation investments to drive land use decisions is discouraged. Thus, there is often a mismatch between the problem being addressed and who benefits, who pays, and who decides.

The mismatch is often blamed on the institutions themselves, and particularly the individuals in the institutions, rather than on the broader issues described above. This has led to a serious lack of public confidence in transportation decision making. Decisions are second guessed, bureaucrats are viewed as inefficient at best and nonresponsive at worst; meanwhile, the public demands accountability while limiting staff and fiscal resources. In an increasing number of places, any decision will be suspect.

This distrust is compounded by information overload. The overload works in two opposite ways. First is the issue of how to stay current with and provide ready access to the ever-increasing amount of information that is available, including how to impart information in a useful and timely way to the public and to decision makers. Second is the issue of how to ensure that the right data are considered and that data for measuring across modes and across time are comparable. With an increasing focus on system performance as the true measure of the "success" of our transportation systems, data need to be readily available and easily organized to allow measurement of the relevant aspects of performance (6, p. 18). Data collection is costly, and data manipulation is still suspect (4, p. 11). As just-in-time delivery has redefined the nature of freight movement, so just-in-time information will need to become the byword of transportation planners and providers.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Given that change must occur to deal with the challenges facing the transportation industry, is there a single path down which institutions should be marching?

The draft proceedings of the Conference on Refocusing Planning for 21st Century—Vision for the Year 2009 indicate that the 150 participants in that conference defined an ideal for how decisions should be made in the next millennium. Whereas many types of issues affect the planning process, institutional issues often are perceived as the key factor in its success or failure. Thus the view of the conference participants is both comprehensive and results driven in defining the nature of how future institutions need to work:

The region (metropolitan and non-metropolitan) has a multi-functional vision developed by a public/private consortium that can guide the transportation program. There is a public/private, service-oriented, customer-driven umbrella organization of transportation and other organizations with linked implementation programs that can manage large quantities of input from diverse sources. The umbrella organization will be a virtual institution, a network of organizations linking the affected parties. There will be linked implementation programs, not just plans, with milestones, responsible parties, funding, and regulatory and legislative goals. There will be partnership memoranda of understanding that will be up-to-date and clear, understandable to the public, and capable of promoting accountability politically and to the customer. The organizations will be doing, not talking. (2, p. 40)

The very complexity of this vision implies that to be successful, institutional change will still occur primarily at the individual agency level, but such change will need to focus on the external environment. The vision provides little insight on how this change will occur, but most probably it will mirror how change has occurred in the past. Inherent in the vision is the fact that change must focus on external, not internal, results.

To gain some insight into how change occurs, it is useful to consider the results of a 1998 American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials–sponsored survey that identified the various strategies adopted by state departments of transportation to cope with the changing context of decision making. The survey broke these strategies into four main categories: customer driven, partner driven, workforce driven, or activity driven. For the first two categories, solutions tend to mimic and thus reinforce general planning trends, including broader participation in decision making, more concern for customers, multistate coalitions, and reliance on performance measurement. Other techniques tend to focus on end results such as decentralization, emphasis on real-time operations, enterprise-style management, streamlined project delivery, and use of market-oriented financing (1, pp. 5–8).

Thus, as much as we would like to think otherwise, there is no single answer to how or even what change must occur. We must rely on the same old chestnuts—internal restructuring, resizing, public-private partnerships, performance-based planning, and information sharing—but must do so in the context of new technologies, with new players at the table.

But because change does not happen in a vacuum and because the institutions drive the results of the planning process, the key influences on institutional change will probably be the areas where future transportation planning will likely face challenges as identified by Meyer. The following buzzwords associated with these challenges will need to provide the seeds for shaping the institutional responses:

- Demographic change—who travels and how, who benefits, who decides.
- Economic production and market forces—jobs-housing balance, travel patterns, revenues.
 - Highways plus—unbiased and systematic consideration of all modes.
 - Operations perspective— better managing what we have.
 - Role of technology—new solutions: intelligent transportation systems, telecommuting, clean vehicles.
 - Sense of community—quality of life, environmental justice.
 - Laying the groundwork for pricing—focused congestion pricing.
 - Putting teeth into growth management—land use planning linked to incentives/sanctions.
- Transportation planning with a sustainability framework—longer term, environmental screening, cost-benefit, holistic approaches.
- Decision making and accountability—measurable standards (*I*, pp. 9–17).

Whereas each institution will have to shape its own change, the challenge to the Committee on Intergovernmental Relations and Policy Processes is to provide a forum for sharing experiences and culling useful information to develop tools both to make change easier and to achieve the most effective results.

SUMMARY

The need for institutional change has always been a challenge and will continue to be so in the new millennium. Likewise, the tools for facing the necessary but still undefined changes exist both in past responses and in new technologies and attitudes. The only constant is that institutions must face and cannot shrink from the challenge of change.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper is based on reports prepared for the Conference on Refocusing Planning for the 21st Century held in Washington, D.C., February 7–10, 1999.

REFERENCES

1. Meyer, M. D. Refocusing Transportation Planning for the 21st Century. Presented at Conference on Refocusing Planning for the 21st Century, Washington, D.C., Feb. 1999.
2. Peyrebrune, H. L. *Conference on Refocusing Planning for the 21st Century: Draft Proceedings*. Washington, D.C., Feb. 1999.
3. Burwell, D. G. Transportation, Sustainability, and Land Use. Presented at Conference on Refocusing Planning for the 21st Century, Washington, D.C., Feb. 1999.
4. Neumann, L. A. Integration of Intermodal and Multimodal Considerations in the Planning Process. Presented at Conference on Refocusing Planning for the 21st Century, Washington, D.C., Feb. 1999.

5. Loveless, S. Access to Jobs, the Intersection of Transportation, Social, and Economic Development Policies—A Challenge for Transportation Planning in the 21st Century. Presented at Conference on Refocusing Planning for the 21st Century, Washington, D.C., Feb. 1999.
6. Lockwood, S. C. Mainstreaming Management Operations and ITS in the Planning Process. Presented at Conference on Refocusing Planning for the 21st Century, Washington, D.C., Feb. 1999.