

Key Issues Confronting Public Transportation Planning and Development

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In the final years of the 20th century, public transit and its planning and development have faced continuing changes in current ways of doing business. At the same time, there has been an increasing recognition that current trends and their consequences (decentralized growth and development, wasteful environmental consumption, and dramatically increased traffic congestion) are not supportive of the lifestyles or quality of life that most Americans aspire to. Efforts to improve community planning and to foster a multimodal transportation system are gaining support. A policy debate has been generated at the local and state levels initially but is now likely to become part of the political and policy agenda in Washington, D.C., as well. The renewed acceptance of the merits of planning concepts, alternative development patterns to avoid sprawl, and the multiple roles and benefits of public transit bode well for the transit industry and for the agenda of the Committee on Public Transportation Planning and Development and offers new opportunities as we look toward the 21st century.

CURRENT APPROACHES

Public transit and planning and development are undergoing major changes prompted by both external factors and policy-directed responses.

Public Transit

Public transit has made tremendous strides to adapt to a changing environment (or setting) that is, in most cases, contrary to its best interests or even survival. Through ongoing and deliberate self-examination and promotion, the industry is striving to

- Incorporate the latest technological advances (intelligent transportation systems) in day-to-day operations and fare collection practices;
- Expand the mobility manager concept to provide more flexible and adaptable responses to the realities of changing local and regional travel markets and needs;
- Focus transit employees on the need to foster a customer-first or hospitality industry approach to the riding public;
- Consider new institutional arrangements, including public-private cooperative ventures, to provide, manage, and implement service and project initiatives; and
- Implement expanded research and training programs that explore new approaches and incorporate them into current practice.

The bottom line of these multitrack initiatives is that the public transit industry has recognized that it must adapt or die given the realities of the competitive marketplace, technological advances, and the diverse and sometimes hostile setting for the provision of service.

Planning and Development

The planning and development fields are also changing and adapting to external conditions:

- The renewed focus on neotraditional development patterns, while sometimes viewed as “old wine in a new bottle,” is beginning to attract more attention from consumers and the development community, as well as the media.
- Changing demographics and rising prosperity are leading changes in the quality of community development and the attractiveness of a variety of settings, including a return to urban living.
- The central role of public transit, particularly rail transit, in shaping transit-oriented development is gaining strength (even though the empirical evidence is still mixed).
- Efforts to foster multimunicipal planning and local–county cooperation in fragmented jurisdictions are gaining support, although the home-rule mentality is likely to continue to dominate. One of the biggest successes is the growing movement of state-level initiatives that offer a more consistent policy and coordinated infrastructure investment overlay of county and local government planning activities.
 - Experiments with such techniques as urban growth boundaries and concurrency between development approval and infrastructure availability are being implemented or considered by localities.
 - Outreach techniques and public involvement programs to foster participatory planning are gaining acceptance.

In general, current prospects for planning and development issues, particularly as they relate to developing the settings for public transit to thrive and prosper, are favorable.

PROSPECTS

Macro Issues

Central to any discussion of the future is recognition of various macro issues that will affect everything else that occurs in the 21st century. Issues of this type include

- The effect of technology on daily life and business;
- The increasingly global and interconnected economy and financial structure;
- The aging of the population, both nationally and internationally;
- An increasing disparity between the have and have-not nations, populations, and elements of society;
- Conflicts between sustainable practices and continued consumption of resources at existing rates; and
- Changing notions of nations, communities, and individuals.

These macro issues can bring about a greater concern for planning and the consequences of development decisions and can promote the market for public transit (for

example, sustainability versus consumption and the increasingly elderly population). However, they can also detract from planning's core goals (such as compactness and coordinated infrastructure) and the provision of public transit (for example, the increasing digital communication connections reduce the need for compact development and the traditional role of cities and urban places as central gathering places for commerce).

Local Issues

Local policy and project-level responses, for both planning and public transit, will still require assessments of local trends, issues, and goals, in cooperation with affected community residents and interests.

Local issue assessments will need to examine such areas as

- Changing demographics,
- Changing businesses,
- Multiple (transit service) markets,
- Technological effects,
- Community attitudes,
- Financial capacity,
- Institutional structure,
- Environmental attributes, and
- Unmet needs (social service and physical).

Public transit can continue to play a role in responding to these issues and, where possible, can work toward bending the trends through leadership and example. As public transportation planners, we face a continuing challenge to refine our ability to model the predicted interactions between land uses and transportation demand and supply. Related to that challenge is the development of better techniques to manage, recall, and evaluate information as the new information technology gives us more powerful tools to acquire and store data. Expert systems and other approaches to artificial intelligence could be harnessed, for example, to provide fast recall of examples of solutions to transportation problems in analogous settings. Reasoning by analogy can provide both alternatives to be evaluated and information useful to model calibration and development of other forecasting tools.

CONCLUSION

In general, those involved in the planning and development aspects of the public transit field should be optimistic about the prospects for public transit and the continued need for a strong role for planning. At the same time, continued monitoring of evolving global and local issues will be essential to ensure that planning for public transit is in step with changing community needs, including those of both residents and business enterprises. Continued searches for innovative practices, particularly those that maximize new technology in cost-effective ways, will be critical for transit's success. The committee's agenda, as embodied in its strategic plan, can help the Transportation Research Board to participate in the 21st century challenges ahead.