

CHAPTER 8

SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS

The assessment found three major categories of issues to affect the conduct of transit planning and decisionmaking: (1) those related to the institutional context, (2) those related to the technical planning process, and (3) those involving means used for financing transit.

Some of the most significant influences on transit planning are exerted by the organizations responsible for conducting the planning and making the decisions.

The technical planning process provides the information that public officials and their constituents draw upon in making plans and decisions.

Issues involving transit financing policy are closely interconnected with issues that have arisen within both the other two categories of investigation. Institutions must have access to sources of financing to be effective in implementing plans, while the technical planning process must produce plans that are financially feasible. The sources of funds and the conditions under which they are made available have created significant problems for metropolitan transit planners and decisionmakers.

Effects of the Institutional Context on Transit Decisionmaking

- Responsibility for transit planning and decisionmaking is fragmented among the many governmental agencies involved, particularly at the local and regional levels of government.
- One of the effects of fragmentation is to encourage competition for decisionmaking authority, and particularly for the power to set schedules and budgets for transit improvements. The pressures of competition tend to produce overextensive plans that serve everyone in a region more or less equally, rather than smaller plans focused on parts of the region with specific transit problems.
- Special-purpose agencies charged with transit planning tend to have difficulty responding to local concerns if they begin with a mandate to construct a regional system. Agencies dominated by powerful contractors are likely to be especially unresponsive to the public will.

- Institutional fragmentation also leads to lack of effective coordination between planning for different transportation modes, and between transportation planning and comprehensive planning. Thus important opportunities are lost for improving transit operations through highway management and for developing transportation systems to serve future development patterns.
- Efforts by the Federal Government to improve coordination by lodging transit decisionmaking power in multimodal Metropolitan Planning Organizations have not had notable success. Most Metropolitan Planning organizations are regional councils of government, which, although they are empowered to make regional comprehensive plans, do not have statutory authority or financing resources to put the plans into effect.

#### Effect of the Technical Planning Process on Transit Decisionmaking

- The proper function of technical planning is to provide the objective information that is needed to guide decision-making. One of the most important lessons learned from the metropolitan experience is that a predetermined solution tends to seriously diminish the objectivity of the technical planning work.
- Cities in which no one transit system was the clear favorite have produced more impartial analysis concerning the merits of alternative proposals.
- The several reasons for narrowness of early transit planning include the general ignorance of the range of technological options, the lack of UMTA support for planning, and pressure exerted by engineering consultants with previous experience in conventional transit (and with a vested interest in producing a plan they would be qualified to design and construct).
- Lacking the technical information that might have been provided by a continuing transit system planning process, political and business leaders tended to settle on the single technological alternative with which they were familiar and to make a commitment to it at the time that they promoted the initiation of transit system planning.
- The pressures for predetermining plans have worked against open, participatory transit planning that evaluates a broad range of alternatives against criteria based on public goals. Alternatives have been examined on a systemwide instead of subarea basis. Plans have tended to be inflexible instead of preserving options for dealing with future changes in technology or transportation needs.

- The data and methodologies used to forecast ridership help determine the outcome of the planning process. Nevertheless, the reliability of transit ridership forecasts over time has yet to be demonstrated.
- In a similar vein, no convincing evidence has been presented that the presence of a transit system per se influences land use in the absence of coordinated land use controls.
- Citizen participation programs are a means for correcting data about public values and needs that are essential for making good transportation plans. Although public officials increasingly regard public participation as an integral part of the planning and design process, well-structured participation programs have not been widely used. Federal requirements call for citizen participation but do not explain how to proceed.
- \* One of the difficulties in gaining public involvement, especially during the 1960s, was the commonly held assumption that rapid transit did not threaten to create unwanted impacts.
- On the negative side of the issue, citizen participation programs can lengthen the planning process, and, if the interests of any small group are allowed to dominate, they can bias decisionmaking.
- UMTA's proposed policy for its major urban mass transportation investments may go a long way toward resolving some of these issues, particularly the overemphasis on fixed, long-range plans. However, the policy's success is dependent large extend on the ability of UMTA's small, centralized staff to review whether the local planning process has a full range of feasible transit options. More importantly, the policy fails to address a number of major institutional and financing issues.

#### Effects of Financing Mechanisms on Transit Decisionmaking

- Financing issues cut across the other major categories of investigation.
- Soaring increases in operating expenses and the costs of proposed new systems have created new pressure for expanding the amount of Federal support for transit that is available, and for increasing the flexibility in the uses to which the funds can be put.
- Several aspects of Federal financing policy encouraged regional, long-range transit planning to the exclusion of short-range, more localized planning. Because of the early lack of UMTA support for continuing transit system planning, transit studies were initiated in many

metropolitan areas as a result of reaction to the construction of interstate highways. Heavy rail transit technology was seen as the obvious alternative for serving the long distance commuter with less disruption to neighborhoods. The availability of Federal funds for capital improvements only also has created a bias for extensive systems.

- Separate funding and administration of highway and transit programs at all levels of government, resulting in diverse objectives and lack of coordination, has prevented (and continues to prevent) the advancement of transit improvements that require changes in street/highway management policy.
- At the regional level, the need to gain approval in referenda for transit financing bonds or taxes has also led to long-range plans for overly extensive, single technology regional systems. A specific technological concept with broad voter recognition and appeal often was required in order for metropolitan leadership to generate sufficient interest to raise the necessary local and state funds to initiate a transit planning program, even with Federal funding. Ironically, the decision to present an extensive regional system to voters in several cases resulted in defeat of the proposal on the grounds that it was too expensive.
- Voters in a regional transit financing referendum like to see a very specific plan so they know what they are buying. In part to keep the price tag low, estimates do not provide for many of the costly activities -- land acquisition and the like -- necessary to take full advantage of development opportunities in the vicinity of transit stations or corridors.

At the root of any effort to **resolve** these issues is a broader **issue** involving the question of establishing national goals for public transportation. Existing goals offer no concrete answers to the central questions of how much public transportation the nation wants to buy, what purpose it should serve, and who should pay for it. These goals must be more sharply defined if they are to be used as a **firm basis for mobilizing, dispensing, and evaluating the use of Federal funds.** The kind of goals that are set will underlie whether more specific policies to shape **transit institutions, planning, and financing will achieve their intended effects.**