

The Future of Transportation Guided by Lessons from the Past

The further backward you look, the further forward you can see. - Winston Churchill

Churchill was right. As we enter the 21st century, the future of transportation will likely be guided by lessons learned from past history. In 1996, Thomas B. Deen, former executive director of the Transportation Research Board, described six of these lessons in "Search for Sustainable Transportation: Some Lessons Learned."¹ They are still valid today and worth remembering for tomorrow.

First Lesson

People demand improvements in mobility and the environment simultaneously. Frequently, citizens have banded together to stop transportation projects they feel would harm the environment. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has been forced to back down from its regulatory pronouncements when the impacts severely affect needed transportation improvements, for example, penalizing states by withholding federal funds when emission standards are not met. Any chance of future success rests with encouraging cooperation, not divisiveness, between the groups aligned with mobility and the environment.

¹Deen, Thomas B., 1996. "Search for Sustainable Transportation: Some Lessons Learned." *Transportation Quarterly* 50, No. 4:9-17.

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Second Lesson

Changing consumer behavior is exceedingly difficult. Urban planning cannot dictate the needs of the market. The following list illustrates this point:

<u>Goal</u>	<u>Reality-Check</u>
-- Reduce VMT per capita	Increasing VMT
-- Higher vehicle occupancy rates	Lower vehicle occupancy rates
-- Increase transit ridership	Declining transit ridership
-- Greater urban densities	People moving from cities to less dense satellite communities, i.e., sprawl
-- Integrate land-use and transportation planning	Land-use is local: transportation may be local, regional, state, national, or international issue
-- Reduce energy consumption	Increasing energy consumption
-- Reduce emissions	Increasing emissions with use

The most dramatic improvements in recent years have been technological solutions that are transparent and do not require people to consciously change their behavior. Also, as incomes rise, people tend to acquire more vehicles and drive them more miles.

Third Lesson

Cities are complex. They face a myriad of problems that transportation policy cannot solve. Some of these problems include education, housing, jobs, economic growth, drugs and crime. As city dwellers move out to the suburbs in search of better value and lower costs, the remaining taxbase and the resources to pay for city services is sharply diminished. This perpetuates continuing cycles of exodus to outlying communities. Ironically, the very transportation policies that seek to contain sprawl and congestion may actually encourage them instead. Attempts to increase suburban densities through suppression of highway capacities may simply intensify congestion. More people will move farther away creating even more sprawl.

Fourth Lesson

Transportation improvements are often based on sub-optimal (second best) solutions. Optimal solutions usually lack political acceptability. Congestion pricing is the classic example. If people were charged for the distance they drove as well as the time-of-day they drove, road demand could be more efficiently met. This is precisely how telephone services are charged in the private sector. There is enormous reluctance to impose this concept on motorists. Highways have always been known as “freeways” in California and other western states. This does not help the marketing of congestion pricing.

Fifth Lesson

Strategic planning and research must allow for uncertainties. The direction of transportation research lacks consensus. Some would say that spending millions of dollars on car technologies is beneficial, since any incremental savings are multiplied by literally millions of vehicles and billions of miles. Others would counter that any investment that promotes highway travel is misplaced, since it inherently discourages alternative forms or modes of travel.

Sixth Lesson

Each community has its own unique set of goals and values. Transportation policies are not designed in a “one-size fits all” style. Since 1956 and the advent of the Interstate system, federal legislation, regulations, and funding have defined

transportation policies for state and local authorities. Now that the Interstates are complete, flexibility in federal programs and funding embrace the diversity of communities. Adaptability and diversity will likely increase through time.

Conclusion

Recent experience suggests there are no easy answers for transportation problems. It is difficult because mobility interests conflict with environmental interests and compromise effective solutions. Also, Deen concludes that consumer behavior resists change. Future improvements will likely be invisible ones, not requiring changes in consumer behavior.

New! New! New! New!

**Comparison of Automobile Related Taxes
as of January 1, 2000**

How much does the typical motorist pay in highway user taxes and fees to own and operate an automobile? A comparison of these taxes has just been completed for the states of Oregon, Washington, California, Idaho, Nevada, Arizona, and Montana. The comparison shows that automobile related taxes in Oregon are significantly lower than other western states, regardless of whether the money is spent on highways or not. See

<http://www.odot.state.or.us/tdb/policy/tax/tax2000.htm>

It is interesting to note the sweeping changes that have occurred in the state of Washington. Voters repealed the motor vehicle excise tax and replaced it with a flat \$30 fee. Other miscellaneous fees bring the total registration amount to \$51.50. Despite a revenue loss of about \$750 million per year, Washington's automobile related taxes and fees are about twice those in Oregon.

