

Critical Assessment of the Planning and Decisionmaking Process

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The conflicts between the Metropolitan Council and the Metropolitan Transit Commission have had both negative and positive effects on the Twin Cities' transit planning process. It is clear that disagreements between the Council and the Commission in particular instances have caused a duplication of some planning efforts and delays in some decisions.

On the other hand, it can be argued that the public has benefited from the airing of the alternative transit solutions that have been advocated. "It was the legislature's purpose to promote open discussion and possible disagreements," noted Metropolitan Transit Commission Chairman Doug Kelm, "with the idea that through debate and discussion, a more thoroughly considered overall plan for the metropolitan area would result . . . , indeed the legislature even made provision for itself to be the final arbiter of any dispute that the system was unable to resolve."¹³

Forum for Decisionmaking

The Metropolitan Reorganization Act of 1974 (MRA) clarified the role of each agency concerning transit planning. The Metropolitan Council sets the overall policy framework or plan and then reviews the programs from each commission, including the Metropolitan Transit Commission, to make sure that they are consistent with the policy plan. More specifically, the act states that "the (Metropolitan) Council shall adopt a transportation policy plan as a part of its comprehensive development guide . . . which shall include policies relating to all transportation forums."¹⁴ Q In another section it is further stated, "The Commission shall prepare

. . . a transportation development program, providing for the implementation of the policy plan adopted by the Council."¹⁵

The language cited above from the MRA directed the Metropolitan Council to make broad policy regarding transportation and directed the Metropolitan Transit Commission to develop its specific transportation development program consistent with the policy direction provided by the Council.

In other words, the Metropolitan Council makes "policy" decisions and the Metropolitan Transit Commission makes "technical" decisions. The Council-Commission controversy now centers on what are "policy" decisions as distinct from "technical" decisions. The selection of a transit mode is the unresolved fundamental decision which remains subject to this controversy. The Metropolitan Transit Commission feels that choice of mode is a "technical" *decision while the* Metropolitan Council believes that the choice of mode is a "policy" decision, or at the least, has a very significant impact on implementing its policies for the region in all areas.¹⁶

A final judgment concerning the success of MRA in resolving the transit planning conflict between the Metropolitan Council and the Metropolitan Transit Commission must be deferred until the decisionmaking process it put in motion has produced a long-range plan.

Public Involvement

The early phases of long-range planning conducted by the Metropolitan Transit Commission in cooperation with the Metropolitan Council relied on a 41-member Advisory Committee on Transit (ACT), a volunteer group composed of representatives chosen by the commissioners themselves.

¹³Statement b, Commission Chairman Doug Kelm on the "roles and Relationships of the Metropolitan Council and the Metropolitan Transit Commission," January 22, 1973.

¹⁴ Minnesota Statutes 1971, Section 473A. 051, Subdivision 1.

¹⁵ Minnesota Statutes 1971, Section 473 A.06, Subdivision 1a.

¹⁶ The Council's report (April, 1975) to the legislature pursuant to the Small Vehicle Study points out that a decision to implement a regional, fixed-guideway system would preclude other needed regional service improvements, p. 37.

An ACT member serves on the Project Management Board of some studies as the public representative. In addition, the group hears presentations on all projects. The poor attendance at ACT meetings and the countless other responsibilities of its members may be two reasons why the group has been ineffective as a significant influence on the Commission's decisions.

.Although the Metropolitan Transit Commission does not utilize conventional public hearings as a method of community participation, it has frequently made informal public presentations on the course of its studies.

When the Metropolitan Reorganization Act of 1974 placed responsibility for long-range comprehensive transportation planning with the Metropolitan Council it also contained a provision for public agency and citizen involvement which states as follows:

The Council shall assure administration and coordination of transportation planning with appropriate State, regional and other agencies, counties, and municipalities, and together with the Commission shall establish such an advisory body consisting of citizen representatives, Commission, municipality, county and appropriate State agency representatives in fulfillment of the planning responsibilities of the Council and the Commission.

Under this authority, the Metropolitan Council established the Transportation Advisory Board in September 1974 to replace the old Transportation Planning Program (TPP) for the purposes of providing a forum for local officials and citizens to discuss transportation matters, for assisting and advising the Metropolitan Council, and to satisfy the planning requirements of the Section 134 provision of the Federal-Aid Highway Act. Its three major activities were to consist of reviewing and approving the unified transportation planning program, monitoring the work of that program, and developing an annual report.

The transportation Advisory Board has held one or two meetings per month primarily focused upon short-range issues of transportation concern. The Board tends to reflect the views of county and suburban officials. Overall, the Transportation Advisory Board appears to have the potential for being a more effective channel for agency and

community input than the TPP was, inasmuch as it has been assigned its own staff coordinator and appears to have better access to the Metropolitan Council.

Generally, the discussion of transit issues in the Twin Cities outside the walls of the formal planning institutions has been widespread, perceptive, and sophisticated. One reason is the work of the Citizens League. The League is an independent, nonpartisan educational organization in the Twin Cities area, founded in 1952, which has specialized in questions of government planning, finance, and organization. It has a number of volunteer research committees which are supported by full-time professional staff. Several such committees have produced a number of reports since 1965 addressing transit issues. These reports have had wide circulation and significant influence on the transit planning process.

Other reasons can be cited for the high level of community awareness of transit issues, including extensive amount of press coverage by individuals who understand the key issues, the open, well-publicized discussion forums in the legislative arena, and the large number of interest groups (for example, the Minnesota Public Interest Research Group, MPIRG) which are concerned with transportation issues.

In developing its family of vehicles plan, the Commission ran into significant community opposition. People questioned the need for a transit plan consisting primarily of radial rail corridors focused on downtown Minneapolis, where only 5 percent of all metropolitan trips were destined. With two downtowns and a relatively low population density in the region, citizen groups felt another type of solution would be more appropriate. The Citizens League conducted a series of studies to develop innovative solutions to the region's transportation problems, based on an initial premise that it was important first to build transit ridership and not necessarily transit facilities.

The Minnesota Legislature has provided the Twin Cities metropolitan area with one of the strongest and most comprehensive regional planning agencies anywhere in the country. Compared with the more conventional Council of Governments, which has only the review powers given it by the Federal A-95 process as applied to federally aided projects, the Metropolitan Council

has been provided with a means by which disputes can be settled at the regional level.

The Council was authorized in its enacting legislation to prepare and adopt a comprehensive development guide for the metropolitan area encompassing physical, social, and economic needs of the area. It is further authorized to review all long-term comprehensive plans for the metropolitan area, and if the Council determines that such plans have "metropolitan significance," it has the power to temporarily set aside the plans.

More specifically, in order to implement plans the Metropolitan Council has the further powers to:

- Review and comment on comprehensive plans of local governments which are required to submit such plans.
- Review and comment on metropolitan interstate and State trunk highway proposals.
- Review and comment on Federal aid applications, including those for transit planning or development where such review is required by Federal law or a Federal agency.
- Veto grant applications of local governments for open space land acquisition if the project is not in accord with established priorities.
- Operate a metropolitan sanitary sewer and disposal plant system through a subordinate board appointed by the Metropolitan Council.
- Operate an open space program through a subordinate board appointed by the Metropolitan Council.
- Regulate the location and use of solid waste disposal sites.

The Minnesota Legislature is considering the enactment of a new mandatory planning bill that would substantially increase the power of the Metropolitan Council. The new act would require each of the 189 municipalities and each of the seven counties to develop a comprehensive plan by July 1, 1979. Each comprehensive plan would include public facilities, implementation program and financing, and a land use plan which would be reviewed by the Metropolitan Council for consistency with the metropolitan plan. However, the Metropolitan Council would first prepare a

Metropolitan System Statement by July 1, 1976, outlining the capacity of each system—parks, transportation, sewers, and airports. If then in the determination of the Metropolitan Council a particular comprehensive plan is not consistent with metropolitan plans, the Metropolitan Council could require modification as appropriate. The new act would permit the Metropolitan Council to seek court enforcement in order to implement these review and modification powers.

Municipal control is preserved in all areas except the four omitted in the Council's System Statement. The new act is intended to enable the Metropolitan Council to plan effectively for these regional systems. To date, this is the strongest legislation ever seriously considered by any State or even debated in any State legislature.

TECHNICAL PLANNING PROCESS

This section evaluates the technical planning work performed in the two major transit studies in the Twin Cities area: the Metropolitan Transit Commission's three-phase, long-range transit study, beginning in 1968, and the recent (March 1975) Automated Small Vehicle Guideway Systems Study.

In summary, both studies were well designed and meet many of the guidelines for a commendable technical process. No significant criticism of the technical work has been raised in the public debate in the Twin Cities region. When a significant segment of the community concluded the earlier studies had not adequately investigated the small-vehicle alternative, the legislature responded with a mandate for the additional study. The current debate results from disagreement over the level of service to be provided. The differences of opinion probably are not susceptible to solution by provision of any additional technical information.

Goals and Objectives

The long-range transit study begun in 1968 was ahead of its time in that it formalized its goals. Three major goals were identified in the Metropolitan Development Guide: "to provide for ease of movement through the area" and "to provide for a variety of modes of travel to meet the needs of different people." These two goals are directly related to the third and most important

goal, the achievement of what is generally called “a higher quality of life.” Although these goals were very general, they provided the basis for evaluation criteria which were applied in the analysis of each alternative.

Development and Evaluation of Alternatives

The first effort in the long-range study program was a technical report titled “Screening and Evaluation of Public Transit Systems.” This report considered nearly 100 transportation vehicle concepts and concluded that prospects for viable transit system alternatives would be limited to conventional transit technology. The study found that “new concept technology” was insufficient for trunk, line transit systems although it might be applicable for higher-density areas (presumably circulation system application). Therefore, the consultants selected more conventional transit systems in a comparative evaluation for the long-range development program.

The basis for the comparative evaluation was a set of criteria developed by the consultant after an assessment of the area’s transportation requirements, extensive discussion with the Transit Commission and its staff, the Metropolitan Council, and other Federal, State, and local officials as well as private citizens. Criteria also were selected from the regional goals as expressed in the Metropolitan Development Guide, which had been prepared by the Joint Program.¹⁷

The range of alternatives did not include a “pure highway” alternative or a “do-nothing” alternative. It did consider several low-level capital investment alternatives, including buses on freeways and streets (System B), and metered freeway buses (System E). The remaining alternatives included:

- System A Rapid Rail Transit
- System A-1 Rapid Rail Transit With Extended Station Spacing
- System C Commuter Railroads
- System D Busways Without Downtown Subways
- System D-1 Busways With Downtown Subways

It should be noted that in 1968 and 1969 no Federal requirements called for consideration of alternatives; consideration of the “do-nothing” alternative was almost unknown. In fact, Federal aid monies were not available to a transit agency to examine highway alternatives as potential solutions nor was it considered appropriate to infringe upon the jurisdiction of another transportation agency. The coordination between the Commission and the Council was primarily at the policy level and not at the technical level.

The study attempts to define each alternative under study in comparable terms to the extent possible. Although the base data information in the forecasting model and patronage figures were criticized by some,¹⁸ generally the problems identified were generic problems attendant with the state-of-the-art. The data represented the most recent and best available.

Next, each of the alternatives was evaluated by the selected criteria using a five-point rating system. This rating system, which utilized the terms “superior,” “excellent,” “good,” “fair” and “poor,” was also criticized as lacking sufficiently precise measures to be able to point out significant differences.¹⁹ However, the major role of the evaluation section was to present a comparative evaluation of the way in which each alternative transit system satisfies generally the designated criteria so that the reader can gain a maximum understanding of the tradeoffs in the process of system selection. The study evaluation indicated that rapid rail transit (System A) had the best overall rating, although busways with CBD subways placed a close second. The study evaluation appears to be comprehensive in considering and discussing the application of each criterion. The consultant also developed and described a transit improvement strategy for long-range implementation and a recommended transit development program.

The consultant’s study in Phase II recommended conventional rail rapid transit to serve as the backbone of a regional system for Twin Cities. Notwithstanding this recommendation, the Commission moved forward in May 1970 with Phase III, which was intended to carry the total regional transit system to the point where all facilities would

¹⁷ Report No. 5 (1968).

¹⁸ MPIRC Report, “The MTC Long-Range Transit planning Process: We’re not Gettin’ There,” November 8, 1972.

¹⁹ Ibid.

be sufficiently well-defined for the initiation of final design. The Phase III work was divided into three sub-phases as follows:

- Phase III-A-1 System Concept Plan and Refinement of Subsystems (1970-71)
- Phase III-A-2 Development of Performance Specifications for Regional Fixed-Guideway System (1971-72)
- Phase III-B Preliminary Design and Detailed Impact Analysis

The Phase III-A-1 study directly followed the completion of the Phase II study. The study refined transit corridors, further investigated development impacts, produced financial plans, and identified the functional roles of the members of the “family of vehicles.” However, this study did not recommend a fixed-guideway vehicle nor vehicle technology to satisfy this function,

The study produced seven technical reports and a final report entitled “Transit Options for the Twin Cities Metropolitan Region,” which summarized the findings of the technical reports and offered some conclusions. One of the technical reports²⁰ presented a discussion of new transit systems pertaining to those systems in which the Federal Government has expressed interest. The technical work in examining alternative new technology systems was criticized for excluding the discussion of any foreign systems and presenting those systems considered in a highly generalized fashion.²¹

As mentioned earlier, the findings of the III-A-1 study provided the basis for the development of the Commission’s major policy statement entitled “Transit in Transportation” (January 1971) which contains objectives, policies, and a system concept plan based on the “family of vehicles” concept.

The Phase III-A-2 study was called “Development of Performance Specifications for a Regional Fixed Guideway System.” This report was the last to be finished in the Commission’s phased approach. This study again considered five generic

systems from which a recommended system was selected:

- Type A—Rapid Rail Transit
- Type B—Transit Expressway (Intermediate Capacity Rapid Transit)
- Type C—Activity Center Transit
- Type D—Personal Rapid Transit
- Type E—Bus on Busways

The last alternative, Type E, was added late in the study at the request of the Metropolitan Council. The analysis of these five transit systems indicated that a conventional rail transit system (Type A), while as cost-effective as the intermediate-capacity fixed-guideway system (ICRT) (Type B), was rejected on the basis that it would not provide adequate service to the outlying major diversified centers. The bus-on-busways system (Type E) was ruled out on two counts—high annual cost and the extreme difficulty in integrating buses into the downtown areas. The PRT (Type D) and activity center transit (Type C) (now called Group Rapid Transit or GRT) were rejected primarily because they were not cost-effective. Thus, the Commission developed performance specifications for the ICRT system (Type B). It estimated that for a first stage of the regional backbone system for the family of vehicles approach, a 37-mile, \$550 million fixed-guideway system using 600 vehicles and 25 stations should be constructed.²²

The most recent study (March 1975), the automated small vehicle fixed guideway systems study, represents a technically sound and well-presented culmination of work comparing the capabilities and costs of several types of small vehicle systems among themselves and with an intermediate-capacity transit system. Within the limitations and specific direction prescribed by the legislature, the joint management effort of the Metropolitan Council and the Metropolitan Transit Commission in directing a consulting team appears to be quite successful.

The consultant’s technical report to the Metropolitan Transit Commission demonstrates a meticulous approach to defining, developing, and evaluating the alternative small-vehicle systems. The consultant team produced detailed working papers over the course of the study. These working

²⁰ Technical Report No. 3 entitled “Review of Technology and Federal Urban Transit Programs.”

²¹ MPIRG Report, op. cit., p. 39.

²² “performance and General System Specifications for the Regional Fixed Guideway System,” Metropolitan Transit Commission (January 1974).

papers covered objectives and criteria, data-base development and analysis methodology, system configurations, screening of small vehicle options, selection of optimum small vehicle systems, traffic forecasts, and system analysis simulation results (in several drafts). The papers were reviewed by the management committee and advisory participants to obtain input in the course of the study.

The study devoted considerable time to the analysis of policy direction given by the Commission, the objectives and criteria which would be utilized to compare the relative merits of one system over another, and the methodology by which the evaluation could be performed. The thorough discussion of this study framework basis appears to have assured the input of all interested parties.

The definition of the generic types of small-vehicle systems was very specific and appears to have allowed the maximum opportunity for direct comparison. In that regard, perhaps one of the unique features of this study was the active participation of a Transit Systems Supplier Advisory Committee composed of transit industry representatives, which also reviewed and commented on the working papers. In addition, there were two technical conferences sponsored for the benefit of this study. Their input was valuable in making the necessary adjustments among generic

systems to allow comparison. In addition to the precise definition of alternatives to be considered, the study includes a comprehensive inventory of both domestic and foreign transit systems throughout the world, indicating their status of operation. The more important foreign systems are outlined and discussed in the study's technical report.

Finally, the small vehicle study updated the work of the Metropolitan Transit Commission on its intermediate-capacity rapid transit system and compares this system with the other small-vehicle fixed-guideway systems. The alternatives were compared in relation to each of the evaluation criteria, and, where possible, presented in tabular form. Once again, the evaluation of alternatives appears to have been done in a comprehensive and thorough manner. Each evaluation criterion was discussed in the evaluation section, noting the advantages and disadvantages of the systems compared. Significant work was done to present the costs and present value analysis of the alternatives in an intelligible and precise manner.

The technical report by the consultants did not recommend a preferred alternative. A determination of specific findings and conclusions from which recommendations would result was left to the Metropolitan Transit Commission and the Metropolitan Council in accordance with the legislative directive.