

# URBAN TRANSPORTATION POLICY: THE NEXT TEN YEARS

BROCK ADAMS\*

Cities and transportation are inseparable. Socially and economically, cities thrive on transportation. A city without mobility is like a city without power, its circulatory system stricken and its ability to function impaired.

But an urban community with its transportation systems serviceable and functioning can also suffer from motion sickness. Cities across the United States today are experiencing a hardening of transportation arteries, victims of well-intentioned but misdirected—and probably outdated—transportation policies. For we have learned, painfully in some cases, that too much mobility can produce immobility—that transportation can cause congestion instead of relieving it. Providing additional capacity is not necessarily the best cure for a city's transportation problems.

The necessity to adjust to an era of limited energy resources has brought other realizations, that excessive reliance on the private automobile, the predominant and obviously preferred means of urban transportation, is grossly inefficient and prevailing urban travel habits shamefully wasteful.

As Justice William J. Brennan observed two decades ago: "Law cannot stand aside from the social changes around it." Neither, I suggest, can transportation policy.

We are in a period of dynamic, often dramatic urban changes, aggravated by energy and environmental concerns. It is also a time of troubling uncertainties for city planners. How can the city be made more habitable, more attractive, more functional? How can it be made more responsive to human needs and the fulfillment of human pur-

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\* United States Secretary of Transportation.

pose? What can be done institutionally as well as physically to ensure a brighter future for urban America?

Transportation policies and programs do not afford a total answer, but they must be a part of any effective solution. Transportation can be an important instrument for shaping urban development, for achieving a satisfactory urban environment, and for assuring that the people who live and work in the nation's cities have the necessary access to services and facilities. Transportation policy fails, however, when it is too introspective—when it views the movement of vehicles as its primary or sole objective. If it is to serve effectively in the preservation and renewal of central cities, and influence the direction and texture of future growth, transportation policy must be concerned more with the creation of better communities than with combating congestion. In most urban areas, congestion is the by-product of a more serious malady—inadequate, or absent, land use planning dominated by policies preoccupied with the movement of vehicles over the movement of people.

Traffic congestion today is symptomatic of a more serious problem—the extravagant use of energy. If transportation policy is to effectively serve President Carter's goal of a ten percent reduction in gasoline consumption by 1985, the over-use and mis-use of the private automobile in urban areas must be corrected, ideally without frustrating lifestyles or impeding urban-suburban mobility. Without the template of a national transportation policy and its disciplines, this would be an impossible task. Even with such a policy, the challenge is a difficult one.

Prescribing policy is easier than implementing it. One problem of policy is that it must always look to the future, when we are accustomed—in our habits as in our law—to find comfort in precedent. We are operating today on the momentum of a transportation policy geared to highway construction. We've been working for twenty years on an interstate road system, which is the product of a policy conceived during the 1940's, when the United States was self-sufficient in petroleum and had a population of 130 million people and 27 million cars. Today we are 220 million persons with 110 million passenger cars and a dependency on foreign oil that has reached fifty percent and is growing.

We are trying, therefore, to shift to a transportation policy that is more environmental, energy and socially sensitive; one that is more reflective of present needs and better tuned to future conditions. Knowing that petroleum is not going to be available in previous quantities or at past prices, and uncertain regarding alternative fuel sources,

we must take prompt action to deal more responsibly with transportation energies. What we're asking of the American people, through a national transportation policy, is to build the systems that are going to be used by the next generation—in the '80's and '90's—just as the generation before us embarked on the construction of the highways we now enjoy.

This is difficult, for our cities especially. The preponderance of urban travel today is by private car, at the inefficient ratio of 1.3 persons per vehicle. Thirty-three percent of the gasoline used in the United States is consumed by automobiles carrying only one person, and peak hour traffic patterns in most urban areas attest to the extent of wasteful commuter travel styles.

It is clear that with gasoline consumption on the increase again—usage rose 4.9 percent in 1976 to a record 7.1 million barrels a day—the federal imposition of new automobile mileage standards, set at eighteen miles per gallon for 1978 and rising incrementally to 27.5 miles per gallon by 1985, must be augmented by companion policies designed to increase vehicle occupancy. While the gradual increase in the numbers of energy-efficient cars on our highways will have an overall, long-term energy conservation effect, greater vehicle occupancy is a relatively shorter-term objective particularly beneficial to the urban situation.

Increased bus and carpool ridership are reasonably quick and cheap, though limited, answers to congestion and energy consumption problems. Properly developed they can also serve as a "bridge" from yesterday's auto-dominated means of urban travel to the more efficient multi-passenger systems inevitable for future urban transportation. In pronouncing and applying policy, we must remember that technologies are not the only long lead-time issues. An extensive fixed rail system, like an interstate highway, may take years to build, but changing customs and institutions can take even longer. Even if modern, fully-developed transportation systems on the order of San Francisco's BART or Washington's METRO were to appear miraculously overnight in every major city in the country they (1) would not find immediate favor with car-users, and (2) could not carry all the commuter traffic if they did.

We tend to forget that in earlier times cities served to lessen the need for transportation, because people lived close by where they worked or shopped. As a suburban culture developed and cities outgrew the reach and appeal of their central urban transit systems, problems of congestion developed, especially in the more densely built eastern cities. Highway solutions have not entirely sufficed in the past and will not

serve in the energy-short future. We must recognize, therefore, that our approach to transportation challenges is the first thing to be reconstructed, and acknowledge that some transportation problems can perhaps be met by non-transportation solutions. In some instances we will have to alter our thinking patterns before we change our traffic patterns. I believe we must return to the idea that the most successful city may not be the one that provides the most mobility, but the one that requires the least.

The transportation policy I have recommended to the President, and the legislative actions we are requesting of the Congress seek to satisfy several objectives.

First, I believe we must improve the way transportation grants are awarded to the states. Some \$12 billion will be available through the transportation grant program during Fiscal 1978, but under the existing system there is no assurance (1) that the funds are allocated in the proper proportions to suit present and future needs, and (2) that they are accessible in ways that best serve the people.

The numerous categorical grant programs presently being administered by the Department's highway, transit and rail administrations are the result of years of independent responses to individual needs. It is perhaps unlikely that under this procedure program levels or allocation formulas could ever be set in ways that would precisely match all state and local priorities. Related problems are that categorical programs persist although needs change, spending choices are constrained, and the hodge-podge of matching ratios and administrative requirements frustrate unified transportation planning.

Urban needs in particular will be better met through a program structure that facilitates trade-off decisions under a combined transportation account. With highway program authorizations and portions of the railroad assistance program up for congressional consideration this year, and with the interest in public transit on the increase, it is time to implement a surface transportation policy that will simplify the delivery of federal assistance and at the same time increase local flexibility in setting priorities and using resources where they will do the most good.

Second, there must be assured sources of funding for long-term transportation programs presently lacking a funding base. The user fee principle has been applied successfully to highway and airway developments, and the merit of a user tax to help meet capital costs is now recognized as beneficial to the construction and maintenance needs of our inland waterways. Mass transit, on the other hand, while it has a

“user fee”—the fare box—lacks the natural tax base necessary to long-term financing. One possible source of such funding, as I and others have suggested, is a tax on petroleum used in transportation which, if dedicated at least in part to public transit, would help assure that the necessary alternative systems are available when gasoline supplies and costs no longer permit the indiscriminate use of the automobile. Moreover, a stable source of revenue is clearly needed to help meet operating deficits, which to date have taken ninety-five percent of the \$4 billion allocated to cities for capital transit projects and operating subsidies by the 1974 Transit Act. I don't believe cities can put forth their best effort to build more efficient systems when needed dollars are going to meet the costs of less efficient systems.

In any case, progress in the expansion and improvement of public transit services in the years ahead clearly demands an assured funding source at the federal level and greater community transit consciousness and support at the local level.

Then, third, our transportation policy and legislative proposals, as I indicated earlier, must support President Carter's overall energy-restraint objectives. In urban terms this entails a growing emphasis over the short-term—the next five years at least—on more efficient uses of existing transportation facilities, through such measures as preferential treatment of buses, increased carpooling, vanpooling and parking management strategies. Long-term, urban transportation policy should assist national efforts to revitalize the nation's cities, making them better places to inhabit and visit. The effectiveness of the urban transportation function, in other words, must henceforth be measured not only by its people-moving ability, but for its salutary influence on energy, land use, environment and urban economy.

To serve these objectives transit must attract a larger constituency. Sixteen million people now ride the transit lines of this country on a daily basis. While the number may seem small in comparison to the tens of millions who travel by car, let us judge public transit's potential on the basis of its promise, not its past. Our interstate highways were lightly traveled in the system's early days.

Federal transportation policy is explicit on the need for increasing dependence on public transportation, but there is no federal blueprint detailing how each metropolitan area should develop its transit services. We do not interpret public transit as necessarily meaning fixed, rapid rail transit. Such systems are costly and not suited to every urban situation. BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) is an attractive, efficient system, but it cost \$1.6 billion to build, would probably cost several

times that amount today, and is demonstrably not the total answer to the Bay Area's transportation needs, as the very effective counterflow lanes on the Golden Gate bridge have proven in encouraging bus ridership and carpools. With the METRO rail system coming into use in the Washington, D.C. area (eighteen miles of the proposed ninety-mile system are now in operation) traffic projections still forecast progressively greater vehicular traffic across the Potomac bridges through the 1980's.

While density is not always a valid justification for fixed rail transit, or the lack of it an indictment against "heavy" rail, such systems in the past have been most successful in the heavily-traveled corridors of compact urban areas. As our cities spread and their suburbs continue to grow, the familiar high-density corridors of yesterday will represent a smaller and shrinking share of the total urban travel market. A growing proportion of metropolitan travel now occurs in low and medium density suburban areas, where trip patterns are too diffuse and travel volumes too small to justify high-capacity transit systems. The legacy of locational freedom of choice the motor vehicle has left us, and the flexibility it has given us, are features fixed rail systems cannot cheaply or easily imitate.

In addition to its efficacy in improving air quality, reducing congestion and conserving fuel, a viable and enlightened transportation policy must complement overall community objectives. Transportation cannot compensate for unplanned or disorderly growth. Transportation, by itself, cannot bring revival to a decaying city or rescue a faltering economy. But when wisely planned, community supported, and ably assisted by timely and effective federal programs, transportation—in combination with other urban initiatives—can stimulate commerce, contribute to better neighborhoods, provide easier access to jobs and recreation, and promote progress in the fulfillment of community goals.

This is the course transportation policy must pursue in the years ahead, as we make the transition from mindless motion to productive, purposeful and efficient urban mobility.

## **ARTICLES**

