

National Association of Regional Councils

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Operating Our Transportation System for Better Performance: Elected Officials' Perspectives on Transportation Operations

Telecast summary by
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On June 7th, 2005, the National Association of Regional Councils, in conjunction with the National Transportation Operations Coalition (NTOC) and the U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), produced a live broadcast entitled *Operating Our Transportation System for Better Performance: Elected Officials Perspective*. The telecast highlighted the elected officials' role as the marketers for transportation system operations and management.

The Big Picture

FHWA Administrator, Mary Peters, opened the telecast by highlighting the serious impacts transportation congestion has on the nation's highway system. Administrator Peters discussed how critical it is that we find better ways to respond more effectively so that congestion does not cripple American economic productivity and quality of life. As a means to combat this issue, the Bush Administration and the Department of Transportation have developed a three part strategy that includes: 1) investing in highway, transit, and safety programs; 2) providing state and local governments a bigger menu of options with which to tackle gridlock; and 3) maximizing the capacity of the existing system through more effective management and innovative technologies.

The transportation system is in a new era of development, focusing on maximizing system capabilities. Transportation stakeholders and the American public must recognize that our transportation network is mostly developed, and now we must shift our attention away from a focus of build-and-expand to a customer approach that focuses on response and operation.

The goal of this new approach is to bring together all piecemeal operations initiatives throughout the country and develop one fluid system that strives to create reliability and efficiency for the driving public. This system will be able to: detect delays due to traffic incidents and have them cleared quickly; manage traffic in and around work zones; and effectively anticipate and deal with the impact of bad weather and special events.

Administrator Peters stated that leadership is extremely important, when trying to shift the mindset of the public. She also stressed how "elected officials are critical in the process of promoting change," and highlighted the importance of educational tools that everyone can use to promote this shift in mindset.

One important resource that can be used is the coalition of transportation stakeholders called the National Transportation Operations Coalition (NTOC). NTOC is an alliance of national associations, practitioners, and private sector groups representing the collective interests of stakeholders at State, local, and regional levels who have a wide range of experience in operations, planning, and public safety. NTOC serves as the outreach arm for transportation management and operations. NARC and FHWA are two of the many groups working within the National Transportation Operations Coalition to promote, collect, and distribute information.

FHWA is currently working on a variety of initiatives that will help promote transportation operations, such as: outreach efforts to make regional transportation operations collaboration and coordination activities commonplace; linking the issues between operations and planning more clearly; developing and using analysis tools that can better evaluate the

benefits of operational improvements; and championing specific advances, such as the 511 traveler information telephone service and electronic toll payment.

Administrator Peters remains optimistic about the future of transportation operations. She stated that “there’s no question we are working to develop better management and operations strategies to become more efficient. This customer focus will help keep America and our economy on the move.”

Administrator Peters left the audience with a few key websites to help them with the promotion of transportation operations:

- The National Transportation Operations Coalition (NTOC) <http://www.ntoctralks.com>
- FHWA Office of Operations <http://ops.fhwa.dot.gov/>
- FHWA Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) Joint Program Office <http://www.its.dot.gov/>
- FHWA ITS/Operations Resource Guide <http://www.its.dot.gov/guide.htm>
- ITS Cost/Benefits Resource website http://itsdeployment2.ed.ornl.gov/technology_overview/

Local Perspectives

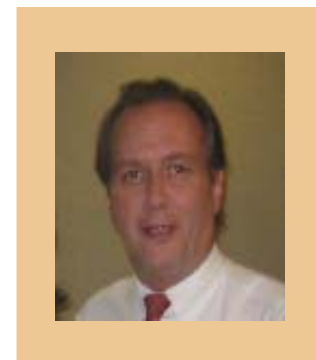
Next on the program, a panel of four distinguished elected officials spoke about how and why they have taken a special interest in transportation operations. Each of these officials serves constituencies at different levels of government and in different locations throughout the country. Throughout the telecast, each elected official discussed the challenges that face their region, the initiatives that were created to deal with these challenges and the importance of operations in this equation.



The elected officials included: **Congresswoman Eddie-Bernice Johnson (D-TX)**, representing the Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas region in the House of Representatives since 1992; **Commissioner Randall Morris**, a member of the Seminole County Board of Commissioners (FL), Board Member and President-Elect for the National Association of Regional Councils, President of the Florida Regional Councils Association, and Chairman of the Metro Plan Orlando; **Delegate Carol S. Petzold (D-MD)**, a Member of House of Delegates since January 14, 1987 and Chairman of the National Conference of State Legislatures Transportation Committee, and a member of the Metropolitan Washington Transportation Planning Board; and **Mayor Joseph Donaldson** of Flagstaff, Arizona (**AZ**), representing the National League of Cities’ Transportation Infrastructure Services Steering Committee and the Northern Arizona Council of Governments as the Chairman of the Transportation Policy Advisory Committee, and who also serves as the Chairman of the Flagstaff Metropolitan Planning Organization.

Local Involvement in Transportation Operations

The panelists started their segment of the program by talking about the importance of local involvement in transportation operations. Commissioner Morris suggested that local governments need to be more involved learning about the technical side of transportation operations because they can play a large part in transmitting this information in an understandable way to the general public. Congresswoman Johnson added to this line of thought, stating that local governments are a key component to operations because they understand their constituencies and the transportation issues in their communities so much better than state or federal officials. Therefore, they can play a large role in connecting the federal and state dollars to the necessary operations initiatives.



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Transportation operations involve critical functions relating to maintaining and managing our roadways, but it does not come without many challenges. Challenges such as congestion and pollution have led to a whole host of negative impacts on society and have not made it easy to operate systems. Congresswoman Johnson discussed how each level of government wants the power to make decisions about how to operate their roadways. She stated that one effective way to deal with this situation is to allocate planning dollars on a regional level, where these governments can interact. Johnson remarked that her planning council is effective because it serves as a “clearinghouse” for planning and collaboration between local jurisdictions. She praised the North Central Texas Council of Governments transportation program, led by Transportation Director Michael Morris, for their progressive efforts.

Mayor Donaldson and Commissioner Morris continued by stating that transportation is an involved process set within a complex environment. This process presents many challenges simultaneously on the local level. As a way to deal with this complexity, Flagstaff leaders also formed a Regional Land Use and Transportation Plan to create policy and guideline consensus to uniformly address the issues throughout their community. Commissioner Morris discussed the challenge of growth and congestion in his area. The Orlando, Florida region is one of the fastest growing areas in the country, therefore they have also set up a regional metropolitan planning organization (MPO), spanning multiple counties, to deal with these negative impacts of growth. By bringing everyone together it has helped to reduce communication and policy differences, specifically deciding where dollars should be spent.

Funding Transportation Projects

The panelists more specifically addressed the issue of funding transportation projects as a large challenge in their community. Congresswoman Johnson stated that giving funding to local governments is not the problem at the federal level; rather it is the issue of donor and non-donor states. Donor states want to see the same amount of money that they give to the system returned to their community.

Commissioner Morris followed by stating that the way in which we will fund transportation initiatives might have to change. He explained that one way this might happen is through tolling initiatives. More communities these days are using tolling as a means of local taxation. He remarked that as long as this is explained properly to the public, they will understand and accept the tolling outcome. Congresswoman Johnson warned that even though tolling is a good option, we must make sure that low income individuals are able to afford this new option of taxation.

Mayor Donaldson discussed how his country has to create a more equitable distribution of funding. The county where Flagstaff is located is one of the poorest in the nation and since they are a donor state, they are only receiving 90% of this money back to enhance their roadways. He stated that Flagstaff cannot continually tax themselves to create better roads. The federal government must have some role in the equation.

Delegate Petzold added that the gas tax and other transportation taxes should be reevaluated and accurately priced according to the efficiency of today’s vehicles. She stated that there are also many other ways in which local governments can tax drivers. Maryland, for example, has increased fees for license plates and drivers licenses.

Improving Transportation Efficiency



By bringing together local stakeholders and by utilizing current technologies, communities are more easily able to address challenges plaguing their transportation systems. Each official discussed various initiatives in their own regions that have helped propel the efficiency of their roadways, whether on a technical, policy, or communications front.

Delegate Petzold elaborated about an important program between Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia called Capital Wireless Integrated Network (CapWin). This initiative was created as an integrated first responder communications network. Housed at the University of Maryland, this program began operations in June of 2004, to join 24 agencies and over 500 individuals in a communications network to deal with emergency response situations.

Flagstaff is also working on many initiatives to enhance communications as well. One of these issues is called “signal synchronization.” Railroads are a large part of the Flagstaff economy, and therefore they have established high speed connections between all trains to make sure everything runs smoothly.

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Flagstaff has also worked on an incident management program. All appropriate stakeholders have worked very closely together to operate a quick response time in case of an emergency.

Congresswoman Johnson spoke about the importance of intermodal transportation in her community. By providing a transportation system that offers all types of transportation and provides a single place in an area to access these transportation services, we can create consistency and reliability.

The Role of Technology

Next, the panelists discussed how technology plays a large role in the development and implementation of effective operations initiatives. Congresswoman Johnson stated that technology is important in keeping our roadways safe and congestion free. Dallas has spent a lot of time and dollars on signal timing devices for traffic lights, toll tags, and an effective railway system that keep traffic flowing in and out of the city, particularly from Dallas to Fort Worth.

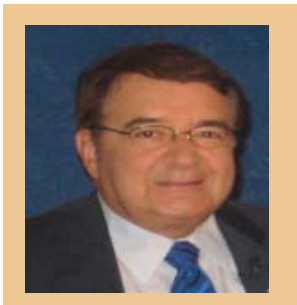
Mayor Donaldson talked about the satellite technology called “remote sensing”. This technology helps in sensing the temperature of the road as well as nearby traffic congestion or accidents. This technology can give travelers a better idea of what problems they are going to face in the roadway ahead.

Delegate Petzold talked about the Montgomery County’s Public Safety Communications Center. This facility is state of the art and brings together multiple agencies and jurisdictions. The Center was built to deal with emergencies and day-to-day management of the roadways. It brings all of the appropriate players under one roof to deal not only with traffic management but also with emergency response and snow removal. This center includes multiple street-side cameras, Internet access, in-vehicle communication systems, and remote sensors. Many other counties and states are using centers like these to manage their roadways more efficiently.

In Orlando, by bringing all stakeholders and funding sources together at all levels of government throughout the state, local governments were able to develop an initiative called Florida. Commissioner Morris discussed how Orlando has pioneered the role of Florida technology. This initiative brings together all the new technological innovations to one place. The program is heavily funded by the FHWA and Florida DOT. Florida includes an enhanced 511 system that will allow drivers at home to call up or use the Internet to find out accurate routes and real time information about the best way to reach a destination. This program will also lower speed limits on the highways in response to accidents or bad weather. The technology will even be able to tell which vehicles are using windshield wipers. Commissioner Morris stated that the point of this initiative is to be able to bring technology to the highways or to the cars themselves. As it evolves it will be a very interactive and easy to use tool for the driving public.

Balancing Transportation with Other Issues

Being an elected official is a balancing act. All of the elected officials addressed the question of how they balance transportation with other issues. Delegate Petzold connected transportation to the environment. She stated that the environment plays a large role in any transportation project whether it is construction or operations. All stakeholders must strive to meet the Clean Air Act. In order to do this, there are certain projects that can promote more environmentally conscious travel. We need to learn ways in which to promote more public transportation. By using public transportation we are keeping more cars off the road, which in turn will reduce the amount of concrete that needs to be laid down.



Mayor Donaldson talked about how important transportation is to rural economic development. He stated that it is very important that intermodal systems, such as the railway, be connected with the trucking industry. The transportation system is integral for the Flagstaff economy and operations and efficiency can save dollars.

Commissioner Morris talked about the balancing act as being extremely difficult. He remarked that local elected officials have not handled this well and the communication between state and federal officials and local officials has not been good, either. Only in the last year or two have we focused on getting out of a world with technical terms, to a place where we can understand and sell the practical benefits of transportation initiatives. In order to do this selling effectively, elected officials must involve the public in a much broader way to make them understand the benefits of important expenditures. Getting the public to buy into

these initiatives is very important and will increase the efficiency with which projects get done at the local level.

Allocating Funds

It is important for elected officials to make proper funding allocations to various transportation initiatives. Each participant talked about how they decide what to fund in their community. Commissioner Morris talked specifically about putting dollars towards maintaining the system. He said that if you put in technology and you don't maintain it, then that technology is worthless. Therefore, we have to focus on projects that promote what is already out there. Not only that, we need to promote technology that crosses jurisdictional boundaries. If we put technology in one county and it doesn't match the technology in the adjacent county, then more money and time has to be spent in coordinating the two transportation systems. To make an effective system you must make a uniform long-range plan that crosses boundaries, and commit to funding these technologies.

Mayor Donaldson reiterated Petzold and Morris' sentiments, by remarking, "How can we build more roads when we don't know how to properly use the ones we have?" We need to take the time and money to understand and operate. No one transportation plan fits all of the challenges and solutions. Each community has to work together with what they have. In order to identify the best operations strategies, Commissioner Morris said that elected officials need to take more time looking at the details of how money is being allocated to make sure that no money is wasted. We also need to cut out any technical jargon that prevents people from understanding the issues at hand.

Delegate Petzold stated that in order for elected officials to understand the issues, they should be in constant contact with transportation officials whom they can trust to teach them and present them with accurate data and programs that will help their communities thrive. Commissioner Morris followed her point by stating that transportation professionals should also seek out elected officials to champion their initiatives and carry their messages in order to make sound policy. Petzold reinforced this point by stating that "every transportation professional lives in a legislators district, and they need to make a good friend of their Legislator." Delegate Petzold stated that Legislators would welcome a "go to" professional. Commissioner Morris continued, stating that in order to form strong ties, both elected officials and transportation professionals cannot be afraid of each other. In order to have effective dialogue, talking must be constant and transparent on all levels. Mayor Donaldson stated that it is important to involve all segments of society from the start. By having an open process, you can more easily hash out challenges and opposition to projects.

Commissioner Morris reinforced Mayor Donaldson's point about cooperation by stating that State and local governments must work together with regional governments. Governments should strive to create "seamless connections" between jurisdictions and state lines, because political boundaries don't apply when you are on the road. Even though there are political pressures to centralize authority, it will be up to the local legislators to make sure there is constant dialogue between jurisdictions and state governments and that money is "flowing down" properly.

Mayor Donaldson said that the way to get money down to the local level is to join forces with other local officials and make sure that your jurisdiction is always talking to elected officials on the higher levels of government. When you come together as a collaborative group with other local governments, it holds more sway.

Telecast viewers represented State Departments of Transportation, city and county transportation agencies, and private sector consultants. Many of the Regional Councils and MPO's taped the telecast for later viewing during board meetings. Viewers appreciated hearing a perspective outside of their local area. A recorded version of the telecast can be viewed from the "NTOC Talks" website at the following address: http://www.ntoctalks.com/narc/telecast_june7_05.php.



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