

WHY THE STORY I JUST POSTED IS BOASTFULLY POLLYANNISH AND WILL NEVER HAPPEN AGAIN

TRANSPORTATION SUCCESS FACTORS AND THE DIFFICULTY IN REPEATING THEM:

After 30 years of land use planning and light rail construction in the Portland area it occurs to me that what we accomplished and of which we are so proud may never happen again in this region.

It cannot be duplicated anywhere else. In fact, it is already starting to unravel here.

If we want to repeat the success of the last 30 years, we must understand not only what the essential elements were of that success, but also how to replicate them. And that might not be possible.

The lessons that we might impart to those younger and to those from other communities, is that the freeway withdrawal money (\$500 million in 1980 dollars, equal to \$1.485 billion today!) was a unique element in all that came together in Portland to build light rail, foster cooperation and indeed make the land use dream come true.

The freeway withdrawal funds, together with significant changes in transit funding during the Reagan administration, provided the keystone in the arch of regional transportation policy.

In the absence of that source of funds today and facing this Administration's proposal for drastic cuts in federal support for transit projects to 30 percent, down from a high of 80 percent, that arch may crumble.

So, the expectations that the focus, cooperation, and sharing, that marked the last thirty years of regional transportation policy, will be repeated, may not be realized.

The factors that made the Portland transportation story a success and which now may be fading away are: ideology (belief in land use reform), alliances (collaborative behavior and close, supportive relationships), and managerial and technical excellence.

–SUCCESS FACTOR ONE: The ideology of Land Use Reform

The Land Use-Transportation Connection has been the controlling principle behind all transportation decisions in this state since the late 70's.

The controlling belief that the use of the land was paramount in deciding transportation improvements was an article of faith ...*de fide*.

Oregon's growth management strategy, now 45 years old, established more than a connection between land use and transportation decisions that set the stage for success.

It directs that land use is the priority and that transportation improvements must serve that use.

As a result, Oregon's planning and transit programs are among the best in the country.

But the ideas behind Senate Bill 10 (1971) and Senate Bill 100 (1973) that resulted in Urban Growth Boundaries(UGB); the Transportation Planning Rule (TPR); development of urban density; protection of farmland and forest and scenic areas are under strain.

TriMet may not get its South Corridor project. It's a huge expense.

And it will be competing with pressure to expand development and hence the UGB in the SW area, decreasing density and making it hard to service with high capacity transit.

The younger generation seems frustrated that there is no freeway from Tualatin to Hillsboro; political leaders are beginning to emerge who have no investment in a nearly 50-year old decision.

People and media complain daily about traffic, and the land use emphasis on density comes under strain.

Gentrification of City neighborhoods is seen often as an unwelcome consequence of the UGB.

The absence of balanced tax system (think no sales tax), the exhaustion of the Freeway Withdrawal Account, and the silo style of state funding for transportation, which could put the cart before the horse, so to speak, all challenge land use and its growth management plan.

-SUCCESS FACTOR TWO: Alliances That Work

In Portland the Three 'C's' of planning (Continuing, Comprehensive and Cooperative), were augmented by these three 'C's': Competent Collaborative Companionship.

In simpler terms the institutional cooperation that built intergovernmental alliances was enriched by a cadre of professionals at different agencies and levels of government who liked each other!

Some of the alumni of that time describe it as being almost magical. People wanted to help each other make this grand land use theory work. Many became good friends.

Their personal bond was strengthened by proficiency, professionalism, and shared political values. This made the institutional partnerships richer and more complete!

But now the cooperation, sharing of resources, willingness to take some risks as a region, seems to have atrophied, if not disappeared. The METRO – TriMet partnership is strained.

Former associates have complained about regional disputes, refusals to cooperate, arguments at the political level that question motives, personalities, etc.

Professionals in deep disagreement end up not liking each other very much. Dislike leads to conflict.

Congressional support is still there, but not as paramount as before.

Part of the reason for this is the unpopularity, nationally and in the Republican party, specifically, at least until now, of earmarking federal "discretionary" spending.

After complaints about "bridges to nowhere", earmarks were abandoned; the federal approval process was tightened; thresholds of technical review and approval were more difficult to meet, and straight forward Congressional support was no longer the essential factor.

The role then of the federal funding advocate, the lobbyist, has changed. It has a stronger technical role as the approval process retreats into the bureaucracy.

The advocate must become more of a technocrat, therefore confusing local governments and the community at large which expect support for community values.

Community values, particularly the more political they are, can get subordinated to the numbers contest: the weighing of objective factors required for federal ratings (such as miles of improvement, pounds of avoid fossil fuel emissions, ridership growth, cost over a bus only system. Etc....)

I tried this theme out on former Metro Ex. Rick Gustafson, who is deeply involved in national streetcar funding, and, I am sincerely happy to report, he disagrees:

“Your woes on the federal government are not well founded. This is so parallel to the Reagan Administration where there were “no new rail projects” to be allowed, OOPS!

The Trump Administration has tried to kill all transit. The Republican Congress has rebuffed the idea and is initiating strong action to instruct the FTA and USDOT to sign full funding grant agreements. They are using “Congressionally Designated Funds” since there are no earmarks. Contracts are being signed. Seattle, Tacoma, Tempe and Santa Ana are all proceeding with streetcar projects. They will outlast the thoughtless administration. It is nasty but there is a lot of support for transit.”

Good for Rick! And he is a great technician as well a political advocate. And let's hope that the nation's streetcar projects continue to get funded.

And we have some new jargon to add to an already jargon infested industry: CDF, Congressionally Dedicated Funds!!

And a reminder that all politics are local!

However, the lack of a national urban policy for land use and transportation or for any other urban issue for that matter, confuses local efforts to collaborate and continues to challenge Oregon communities which are disciplined by the land use requirements when asking the feds for financial help.

But let's hope that Rick is right.

SUCCESS FACTOR THREE - Determined Managerial Excellenc

Tri-Met, METRO, ODOT and other local land use and transportation officials as well, have for years boasted good technical and managerial talent.

Projects have been on time, under budget, have done what they have been designed to do.

What this region had, though, were the very best political-technical managers. The Feds acknowledged that over time.

These are well trained individuals who can connect the political issues in major projects to the technical integrity of such projects.

Moreover, they have skills to communicate the technical/political connections and dynamics to federal technicians and approving authorities.

These people know their craft well and relate well. And there are damn few of them left, maybe none in active bureaucratic roles!

Without these people, the region will have difficulty meeting the challenges of gentrification, environmental justice, economic justice, funding decisions and alignment issues on any major project.

Conclusion

Back to money. The above three success factors and their challenges are made more difficult when it comes to a miserly federal government, silo funding approaches at the state level, reliance on a strained local tax system, and huge expenses for major projects.

Paul Weichrich once suggested to quit thinking big. It confuses the conservative mind! The SW Corridor project looks like something he warned us about!