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Current Issues in Transportation Policy

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Book Reviews

CURRENT ISSUES IN TRANSPORTATION POLICY. Edited by Alan Altshuler. Lexington Books, 1979, 192 pp.

Throughout all of recorded history the civilized world has sought to find faster ways to move people and goods from place to place. The Anglo-French Concorde, at least for the foreseeable future, represents the high water mark in this quest. In 1979 the OPEC nations have forced us to confront the stark reality of whether we can continue to use our automobiles to drive from our home to our office, or whether we can continue to cross the Atlantic in three hours in a fuel-inefficient aircraft. The major consideration is no longer how to get to places faster.

The studies compiled in this book look at a variety of transportation systems, from the airlines to the San Francisco BART, through the eyes of some of the country's best political scientists, urban planners and transportation planners. Also provided are capsule histories of the interstate highway system, airline regulation and deregulation, and various urban transit programs.

Viewing the essays as a group, the reader receives several general impressions. First, reducing our society's adherence to the automobile as its primary means of transportation is virtually impossible to accomplish through transportation planning and new technology. Second, there is never sufficient coordination between the agencies responsible for different transportation modes to develop a workable, planned system. Finally, attempts to meet the needs of all the various special interest groups that must be satisfied in a publicly funded system will generally lead to inefficiency and waste.

The development of the San Francisco BART, as described by Melvin M. Webber, is a classic example of how planners can impose a system on the public which reflects their view on how people should act rather than developing a system premised on actual behavior. A system that ignores the laws that govern individual

social utility is bound to fail and impose tremendous costs on the public.

Similarly, government support can often destroy a perfectly workable system created by the private sector. For example, the chapter by Sandra Rosenbloom and Alan Altshuler recounts that at the turn of the century, sophisticated urban transit and commuter railroad systems—virtually all privately owned—permitted easy public access from suburbs as distant as ten miles from the central city. Government subsidies for highway construction and governmentally controlled fuel prices stimulated this country's reliance on the automobile beyond that which would have likely occurred had normal market forces been allowed to work. This artificial stimulation for individualized travel cut into the profits of the urban transit operators who let the systems run down, having fully depleted their assets, and then sold out to municipal governments. Publicly run transportation became totally inadequate, and public ownership merely stifled whatever incentives remained to create a viable mass transit system.

Publicly owned systems are, of course, much more susceptible to political demands than are their private counterparts. For example, as Doctors Rosenbloom and Altshuler point out, communities around the country, as a result of federal legislation and public pressure, are installing wheelchair lifts in all new buses (and retrofitting others) at a significant cost despite the fact that it is far from clear that wheelchair lifts on conventional buses are cost effective instruments for meeting the mobility needs of wheelchair-bound individuals. Ironically, the authors note, better service at lower cost could probably be provided by giving these handicapped citizens vouchers which could be used for taxis or another more particularized form of transportation. But wheelchair lifts on every bus is a visible victory for special interest advocates and is administratively easier to implement than keeping track of transportation vouchers. The fact that the service is of little value and that its high cost must be borne by other system users seems lost in the political shuffle.

Recognition of the possibility that our country's transportation systems have perhaps suffered from the malaise of too much planning and regulation is heightened by Alan Altshuler's and Roger

Teal's study of the "Political Economy of Airline Deregulation," which paints a picture of the economic inefficiency and waste that stemmed from forty years of a tightly regulated domestic air transport system. Airline deregulation has already enabled airline managers to make a number of changes in service patterns and pricing strategies to establish more efficient systems. These adjustments are already here, and in the long run, they will continue to provide better service to the public and greater profit incentives for the industry. For many years the airlines were viewed as a public utility (a natural monopoly) despite the cries from economists that it was inherently a highly competitive industry. Today, the airlines operate in an unsheltered environment and they are coping well with the challenge of OPEC.

Upon reading this book one must ask these questions: How different are the airlines from other transportation modes? What if BART had never been built and the municipal government had concluded instead that the manner in which suburbanites who voluntarily choose to live ten or fifteen miles from their offices get to work, is a question for the private sector to resolve? One could easily imagine inauguration of service by a variety of commuter bus lines or private van pools. Even a privately financed rail service of some sort does not seem outside the realm of possibilities. Whatever the solution might be, this book is must reading for anyone who still believes in this energy conscious age that an overall transportation policy should continue to be designed and implemented by governments.

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