Creating Great Communities through Transportation: A Perspective on Becoming More Relevant to the Public

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Transportation planning in many American communities is undergoing a paradigm shift in the way problems are defined and solutions evaluated. Communities are redefining and re-evaluating how we move and connect people and invest in our built environments to create unique, safe, and prosperous places that are the heart and soul of our communities.

The planning paradigm of the past assumes that a community’s transportation investment priorities are primarily driven by the projected motor vehicle user benefits using indicators such as the projected roadway level of service, traffic speeds, and/or projected decreases in congestion delays. This paradigm has many human-created rules, policies, computer software programs, and standards that tell transportation professionals what to do when, based on assumptions at the time they were created. This paradigm has been ingrained in our transportation education and ongoing training programs. It is reinforced by decades-old transportation funding programs, although funding programs for maintenance of the infrastructure built under this paradigm are significantly declining.

In fact, to compensate for declining funds from the U.S. federal and state transportation agencies, many regional Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) have received voter approval to create self-help tax programs. Granted, most of these MPO programs still have significant funding for new infrastructure expansion projects to relieve congestion, in addition to supporting transit operations, roadway maintenance, and active transportation programs. Even these programs are not enough to make up for the ever-growing costs of the “build our way out of congestion” mantra. Very few state and local communities have enough funds for maintenance of existing transportation infrastructure. Yet communities are still expanding their infrastructure (largely with one-time development impact fees that get passed onto the home buyer or business owner) based on the paradigm to relieve congestion from induced demand from sprawl development.
This old paradigm is creating an insurmountable “deferred maintenance” liability for most jurisdictions that is growing exponentially, much like a high interest credit card with late fees applied daily because jurisdictions are not able to make minimum payments. “Deferred maintenance” is rarely fully addressed in planning, engineering, or funding.

The old paradigm—based on poor land-use patterns, traffic demand modeling, and engineering design approaches—also prioritizes moving motor vehicles at high speeds, resulting in a false sense of safety for the motorist and barriers for people within the community. Safety becomes another significant cost to communities with lawsuits, enforcement, medical emergency response, and ultimately the loss of a human life. Our streets are often very sterile to human activity, and when interactions occur they result in more than 32,000 fatalities a year and millions of severe injuries from collisions. Safety on our roadways is more than just adding bike lanes and sidewalks next to high-speed roadways. When our roadways and highways, which are arguably our largest public places, become hostile danger zones, they have little chance of serving as economic and activity assets for the community.

Creating a New Planning Paradigm

When transportation professionals are asked why they continue to try to plan and build their way out of congestion, in many cases, the response is to blame “the computer program, level of service policy, or standards that told me to build it that way.” Yet our profession created those rules, policies, computer software programs, and standards to support the old paradigm, so we have a unique opportunity and responsibility to be leaders in our communities in creating new policies, guidelines, and tools that align with a new paradigm. Are you up for the challenge to adapt and create new solutions that better align with community values?

The new planning paradigm places a much greater emphasis on serving, connecting, and moving people with a focus on access to service and activities, multimodal transportation options, environmental quality, economic competitiveness, a community’s unique desired quality of life, economic vitality of the individual and jurisdiction, and public fitness and health. This is driven by a number of contributing factors such as the state of the economy, declining trends in the availability of transportation funding, ever increasing maintenance costs, a reluctance for establishing new revenue sources, vision zero safety movements, National Association of City Transportation Officials guidelines, and more importantly a change in the desires and values of people and how they define safety and quality of life.

Characteristics of talented transportation professionals

Experts, innovators, and leaders in their respective fields perceived the following traits as “RELEVANT” in the communities they serve.

**Relevant Transportation Professionals:**

- Listen.
- Seek feedback.
- Engage everyone.
- Focus on the issues.
- Think and dream bigger.
- Aren’t afraid of conflict.
- Elevate their consciousness.
- Turn challenges into opportunities.
- Give advocates a voice to be heard.
- Collaborate with other professions.
- Develop emotional intelligence.
- Leverage people that are passionate.
- Are unique and celebrate differences.
- Create a vision that inspires and motivates.
- Seek to understand before being understood.
- Give naysayers roles for ownership and buy in.
- Utilize visual rendering to show what is possible.
- Identify trends and themes of community values.
- Turn policies into designs that can be implemented.
- Refuse to be captive in their current circumstances.
- Don’t allow their past to dictate or define their future.
- Ask people what they like and don’t like through pictures.
- Go to people without assuming they will bring forward problems.
- Surround themselves with the most talented experts.
- Realize nothing is impossible by believing, “I’m possible.”
- Use technology that seeks to engage and inspire not just inform.
- Adapt if a process is not producing the desired results.
- Don’t wait for perfection, as it is the enemy of progress and enjoyment of the present.
- Initiate a habit of choosing thoughts and ideas that support feeling good and powerful.
- Create iterative and interactive processes while checking for alignment.
- Don’t fight the current vision, but create a new vision that people can get behind and own.
- Never limit the vision for their community based on the current circumstances or competencies.
- Seek enjoyment from trying, learning, and growing to become the person they were created to be.
- Demonstrate they are listening and hearing ideas and concerns through decisions and actions.
- Utilize the AIM frame approach of where are we today, where do we want to be in the future, and how do we get there.
- Don’t purposefully step on people’s toes and yet don’t go through life walking on egg shells trying to make everyone else happy.
This new paradigm focuses on moving and connecting people, places, and businesses so that communities and neighborhoods can be sustainable (through public health and safety, economic vitality, and the environment) and provide all people with the opportunity to thrive.

As a result, the transportation professional working in 2015 and beyond must possess a number of unique skills and experiences, as well as be properly equipped to identify and develop key stakeholder partnerships in a highly effective manner. Being effective requires leadership. Being efficient requires management. And right now, more than ever before, we need more leadership to make sure we are effectively focusing on the right things. For too long we have focused on doing what we know and do as efficiently as possible that the needs of the people are changing faster than we can mobilize and support. And as a result, the gap in what we know and do and what people in our community are desiring is ever growing. We are experiencing an ever growing trend in advocacy organizations in our communities to hold us accountable for aligning with their community values, or this new paradigm.

This is a time to embrace advocacy organizations as partners to help us better understand the needs and desires of the community. This will require a shift in ITE’s primary focus from developing knowledge, expertise, and ideas to developing leadership and partnerships that will have a greater influence with elected officials. These officials must have the will to establish sustainable funding sources and transportation practices, guidelines, and programs that better align with community values. This requires that future transportation professionals possess key people skills such as emotional intelligence and intuition.

Transportation professionals must foster a certain level of healthy anxiety to avoid becoming the status quo, developing a greater ability to accept new challenges and uncertainties without being satisfied with solving today’s challenges with yesterday’s solutions. We need to understand that yesterday’s solutions are contributing to today’s challenges. We need transportation professionals willing to redefine the problems we are trying to solve and re-evaluate their current situations and toolbox. After all, we are trained community transportation problem solvers; the problem is just changing in front of us.

There is also a need to identify how to better enable, empower, and encourage more transportation professionals to focus on the “right things,” which takes leadership, rather than focusing on “doing things right,” which takes management. We need to focus on designing and building communities for people. And we also need to collaborate more with other professions and professional organizations that are more focused on people and community in order to learn from them. If we become too focused on vehicles, level of service, and infrastructure, we can forget who we are building communities for: people.

A relevant transportation professional today doesn’t sit at a desk and know what is best, but goes out into the community, engages people to understand their needs and desires, and asks questions for clarity in understanding the challenges while observing the way people interact with the built environment. Design should begin with a need to serve, move, and connect people to foster a great community.

Rarely does one person possess all of these strengths, which is why professionals need to surround themselves with other experts who have different strengths in order to elevate their ability to serve people and our communities. Great leaders surround themselves with the best and do not need to be the smartest person in the room. For example, if your strength is problem solving or creating big ideas, yet you are not comfortable engaging the community, then partner with someone who is. Do not avoid engaging people to help you define the problem you are trying to solve.

As leaders in our communities, transportation professionals can chose to inspire and empower others to move away from mediocrity and demonstrate the innovation factor that we have the ability to employ in our projects and communities. Together we can help develop leaders and champions, and empower citizen planners, architects, and engineers. We have to engage the people and communities we serve. We need the transportation profession at the table with the ability to influence great designed communities that people want to live, work, and play in, focusing on moving and connecting people so that communities can thrive in a sustainable manner. Only then can we truly say, “Together we are the Best!”

The transportation profession, which includes each and every one of us, has an important role now and in the future in order to be relevant. We must consider current challenges and opportunities and what works and resonates with people, communities, and elected officials.

Are you up for the challenge and tempted by the opportunity to make a difference in your community? itej

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