Paralysis by analysis on the intermodal front

Last November, Federal Highway Administrator Kenneth Wykle outlined the transportation challenge ahead. Whereas the 20th century had been one of construction, the 21st century must be one of operations capacity enhancement. Simply put, we must do more with less.

The setting for the administrator's comments was the 6th ITS (Intelligent Transportation Systems) World Congress. ITS, despite its oxymoronic-sounding title, has existed for almost 30 years.

It began with freeway management systems, traffic signal systems and other highway-related developments. The passage of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act in 1991 gave the Intelligent Vehicle and Highway System official recognition.

Many companies supplying IVHS were no stranger to the Washington Beltway world. As Department of Defense funding disappeared following the Cold War, aerospace companies sought a new market.

The exhibit floor of the ITS World Congress was a discouraging place for freight intermodalists. Other vendors were predominantly manufacturers of automobilies and consumer electronics. Almost all of their initiatives seemed focused on the convergence of consumer electronics and the Internet in the family car. Increasing highway congestion and commute times have made this a natural market.

IVHS has now become ITS America, and despite its historical connection to intermodal, the organization has made negligible progress in the intermodal freight area.

Its demonstration projects have often been outlandish. One is examining the use of tagging chassies with responders. This project fails to acknowledge, however, the fact that many carriers exhibit no particular talent for keeping track of this information.

A working group has also been established to do process mapping that may identify the flow of data elements through the intermodal freight system. This is a commendable exercise. Improvements will derive from network process improvements.

This project is even seeking to rid itself of management consultants and turn over the initiative to the industry. This change is long overdue.

Too often, it seems, transportation initiatives are identified, prioritized and managed by consultants rather than by industry or the government. This practice makes the pressing issues of our industry seem more remote and hence go unanswered by efficient policy.

Governmental process is segregated into modal silos. This is true both in the executive and legislative branches, and on both federal and state levels. This makes intermodal advancement very difficult. Furthermore, freight and passenger intermodal issues are dealt with separately.

Last month, the 79th annual meeting of the Transportation Research Board highlighted these shortcomings. The sessions very clearly showed where money is going.

One program segment, which demonstrated the traditional strength of highway funding, could have been labeled "Everything You Wanted to Know About Paving But Were Afraid to Ask."

Another program track might have been called "MPOs: Going Down the Road Feeling Bad." Metropolitan Planning Organizations became empowered under ISTEA and TEA-21, the Transportation Efficiency Act, but their primary focus remains solving highway congestion and developing alternatives.

The funding here has been mostly absorbed by consultants and university academics. Despite all the best intentions, the disconnect between MPOs and freight initiatives remains substantial. The success stories are all the more memorable because they are so few.

As a result, industry participation in these organizations is limited. What little support exists goes to organizations, such as the Intermodal Association of North America, which help members survive by pinpointing best practices.

Since ISTEA became law, there have been a great number of consultant engagements, industry studies, outreach and listening sessions. There have been very few improvements. The end products look impressive in a bookcase, but very little new material has been introduced.

Anyone who has spent time working in intermodal can highlight the choke points and limits to growth. The problems are often the same with both freight and passenger transportation. (The problems getting passengers to and from airports, for example, are the same as for air cargo.)

Why have fundamental intermodal problems remained unsolved? I believe the problem is a lack of initiative that fails to transcend the institutional barriers.

Furthermore, the lack of adequate resources forces the government to rely on the transitory products of consultants and studies. Old problems are recycled — not solved. Institutional memory and intellectual capital reside outside the government.

Our nation's history is filled with success stories in which industry, government and academia came together to solve critical problems. It is time for this to happen with intermodal transportation.

Nobody questions the critical need for intermodal to overcome capacity problems that choke our transportation system.

Next week, TRB, with support from the U.S. Departments of Defense and Transportation, is hosting a national conference focusing on the state of readiness for national and global intermodal freight movement. I hope that this is the establishment of a true public-private partnership to further intermodal progress in this country.

It is time to move beyond simply re-scrubbing the old problems. We must develop solutions before the network becomes hopelessly congested and the country suffers the associated economic woes.

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