



Transport planning – the orphan child

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Transport planning is an orphan child: land use, resource management, environmental and energy planning all touch on transport planning, but are incidental to a different main focus.

Who does cover transport planning? By default maybe traffic engineers, but (even if 'integrated' or multi-modal) their focus on traffic and technical solutions brings its own bias.

Then there are experts in public transport, rail freight, or cycle route networks, but each is a niche area. For example, passenger rail planning may end at the station, leaving integration with other transport, or 'transit-oriented development', to others.

Urban designers may prescribe street narrowing, traffic calming, shared pedestrian spaces and grid layouts – all anathema to traffic engineers, because urban designers see a street as a space, and traffic engineers as a movement network link.

Then there's funding – what isn't funded won't get built. In New Zealand the *National Land Transport Fund* (NLTF), hypothecated from motor traffic revenue (petrol tax, diesel road user charges, registration and licencing), may be seen as 'belonging to' motorists and trucking firms. This has led to motor-traffic benefits being given greater weight in economic evaluation, compared to non-car benefits and urban form effects (which may even be ignored).

People not directly paying motor traffic revenue may be seen as freeloaders, even though they also pay for transport through local body rates, as car owners, or as income tax payers and

even though they may benefit motor traffic by using different forms of transport.

For example, the Palmerston North-Wellington passenger rail service receives no NLTF funding and struggles financially. Elsewhere, a proposed Hamilton-Auckland service has strong public support yet is again refused NLTF funding. Ironically, an NLTF 100 percent funded *Road of National Significance* is being built in parallel with each of these. This has the potential to undermine rail service viability while bringing significant motor traffic into major centres, and requiring parking spaces where land values are already at a premium.

The NLTF system, set up as a user-pays system for motor traffic, usually means economic evaluation at the 'micro' level of individual projects and users. Very little 'macro' NLTF evaluation ever takes place, regionally or nationwide. Previous attempts by the NZ Transport Agency predecessor bodies to address this, such as the 'package approach' (from 2004), have never broken away from the NLTF's micro-level, user-pays and road-based focus.

Planners have a key role in wider evaluation, because only planners look at the overall context of land use planning, urban form, natural resource management, energy use and environmental effects. Planners can also discern the substantive reasoning behind sometimes angry public voices. For example, when the public says a new road isn't needed, planners may understand the reasons behind this better than the traffic modelling professionals.

Some serious thinking is needed on what transport is and why we 'do' it, before we consider needs, issues and problems (such as traffic congestion). This may stop us wasting time on false goals, or missing wider effects. We may even question sloganised statements such as "roads bring jobs" when in fact public transport tends to bring more. Sometimes less travel is better, especially if that means savings in fuel use, time use, adverse environmental effects, and land taken up for roads and parking.

Transport planning hasn't properly embraced the internet yet. This is much more than real-time information, home-working or telecommuting; everywhere we are doing more on-line instead of hard-copy, meaning less physical travel. This brings into question the extent to which traffic forecasting (which tends to extrapolate past trends) is appropriate as a basis for identifying transport needs.

Face-to-face interaction – what towns and cities have always been about – would suggest a strong focus on walking, not as a safety issue but centre-stage because of its wider benefits. It's the most space-efficient of all transport, with health and social effects, quite apart from environmental benefits. As Danish urban designer Jan Gehl has pointed out, spaces attractive for walking induce people to linger, stay and interact (Gehl, 2004). Crime prevention also heavily relies upon 'eyes on the street'.

Next should come cycling. A form of transport often seen as an environmentally-aware and health-conscious option but perhaps only for those 'keen' on it as a 'lifestyle choice'. What if we created a public realm where hopping on a bike was as normal as walking? This goes way beyond providing 'cycleways', and in fact it is now well demonstrated that cyclists benefit more from reduced motor traffic volume and speed than from the provision of 'cycling facilities' - although still important (NZ Transport Agency, 2004). There are also public image issues, such as debates around compulsory helmets; even some medics oppose them because of the missed health benefits of those put off cycling, and the false sense of security which may encourage risk-taking (Hillman, 1992). Also the thinking behind

the 'Frocks on Bikes' movement that is, to normalise cycling, and get away from its perception as athletic males 'working out'.

Walking and cycling aren't so good over long distances and here public transport is more space-efficient than the car. Even with ride-sharing, cars need much more road space per person, as well as parking land in areas where it is in high demand (notably city centres). Much of the Auckland CBD rail loop debate is at cross purposes. While NLTF funding rules tend to focus on 'transport benefits' such as saved commuting time, 'wider economic' or 'agglomeration benefits' count benefits from larger volumes of people brought into the centre doing business with each other, without needing a car park (APB&B, 2010).

All this has implications for continuing professional development. Planners haven't tended to focus on some of the areas alluded to above, which are sometimes fluid and contentious. This requires exploration, critique and debate, not just familiarisation with established knowledge – although planners do need to start with a basic knowledge of areas they may not have previously explored.

Transport planning, as an 'orphan child', is searching for a parent. I hope planners will 'adopt' and 'bring it up'.

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