

President's Message: Our Choices in Motion

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Do you believe we are on the way to a more sustainable life? The words *transportation* and *sustainable* probably don't mix well in many people's minds. When we think of transportation, it may be hard to realize modes of transportation that do not have some lasting effect on the environment. It may also challenge us to think about how we would get our sons and daughters to soccer practice, music lessons, and other school activities, and how we would do our weekly grocery shopping, errands, and our daily work commute without getting in our cars, SUVs, or vans. How do we get smarter about the choices we make when we travel?

I am fortunate. My house is only seven blocks from the commuter rail station, and the downtown Chicago transportation center that Metra's northwest line goes into is just across the street from my office. The transportation center includes restaurants, shops, a fresh-food market, and a pharmacy/convenience store. I like to believe that Chicago has the best mass transit system in the country. New Yorkers and others may clamor to differ, I am sure. Still, it was convenient location to rail transit that was one of the factors that influenced why we chose to live where we do.

Claiming to be green or sustainable is easy; it plays into our intentions to be seen as responsible to our community and the environment. However, the intent of our actions doesn't always change our behaviors when it comes to traveling. It's too easy to make that solitary choice to use a motorized vehicle to get where we want to go. There are roads everywhere. However, our modes of travel have evolved over the years. Certainly, in the last decade, taking transit or some mode other than a car for our daily commute has been an important preference change among many people. Ridership in all cities where rail transit exists has increased; and my experience has been

that every transit line that has opened in an urban area has been immensely more popular than expected.

For some of us, the headaches of rush hour, time lost in commuting by automobile, the higher fuel prices, and the fact we do have more travel-mode choices, are finally getting us out of our cars. We are realizing that our nation's roadways are complicated systems with complicated jurisdiction and governance structures. When we can reduce traffic congestion and accelerate travel times, it is a blessing for everyone and improves our quality of travel. Today with the Obama administration's emphasis on more efficient passenger rail and high-speed rail, we are entering a new era of traveling experiences.

For our aging roadways and highways, transportation priorities have changed. Instead of high-profile expansion projects topping wish lists, transportation agencies struggle to find enough money just to operate and maintain their existing system. Even though the next long-term transportation authorization bill seems perpetually stuck in Congress, state transportation agencies across the country focus to preserve their infrastructure. As one example, Caltrans (California DOT) will spend $\frac{1}{2}$ billion dollars of the state's \$4 billion in stimulus aid on highway maintenance projects alone. According to the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), the financial outlays nationwide need to increase 42% just to maintain existing roads and bridges. All the while, the issues of public safety, greater mobility, and finding innovative ways to address climate change have come forth to challenge us.

We need more comprehensive multi-modal travel systems that provide us with better travel choices and reduce pollution levels, as well. Over the past several decades, other countries have seen the value of high-speed rail as a preferred mode of efficient travel. In this country, California, Florida, and Illinois are also pushing that vision forward. As we have seen, upgrading our nation's roadway infrastructure and creating a new high-speed rail culture will require a staggering amount of money. That is why many state DOTs have

already sought legislative authority to seek increased investment monies from all types of sources, road tolling, private investment, new taxes, bonds or referendums, and public/private partnerships (P3), among them. With P3 partnering there is more ability to invest in infrastructure more quickly so more of the system is up and running sooner. There is also the transfer of investment risk from public transportation agencies to the private sector, thereby putting less public funds in jeopardy. With P3 there is also more opportunity for innovation in delivery, using multifaceted teams committed to stringent goal-oriented, accomplishment deadlines.

At the end of the day, for these strategies to work, there must be a solid business plan (topped with entrepreneurialism) that meets the public demand and the legislative commitment during complex political times. Creating responsible choice-driven infrastructure means finding solutions that save money, save time in process, and evoke creativity in design and construction, while preserving sensitive resources. Moreover, we all realize that rebuilding and expanding our rail infrastructure to be efficient, sustainable, and realistic from the perspective of the people actually using the system does enable us to be more proactive in our modal choices. The day is here that our choices in motion provide an overarching goal for sustainable transportation.

Now let's consider the human side of our travel choices. In this collision of human need, science, business, and engineering, it is the architecture of our behaviors that influence us. There must be ways to improve our travel choices that move us away from our seemingly insatiable appetite for things that require a lot of energy. As both environmental professionals and commuters, we need to experience both national and global dialogue to find solutions. Within our ongoing environmental challenges that result from transporting people and goods, we must be courageous; we must be more forward-thinking. Our current travel context is not working as effectively as it needs to get us there. To experience a *breakthrough*, we need to *break with* convention and traditional thinking. We must turn our experience, our knowledge, into breakthrough actions of leadership.

As two simple examples of breakthrough leadership, Caltrans is using rubberized asphalt made from recycled tires. Road testing so far has shown that this asphalt provides a quieter, smoother ride and a more durable, longer pavement life. The Illinois State Toll Highway Authority is reusing in-place materials by *rubblizing* existing concrete pavement to provide a solid base for new pavement. This method breaks with the traditional method of breaking the old pavement into large pieces that are then hauled to a landfill. Not only does this method consume less land-fill space and deplete less limited material resources, it also uses significantly less amounts of energy in road building. As we learn to rebuild roads in these and other creative ways, we also learn the importance of life-cycle cost savings and the improved benefits to our environment. Now we are talking more sustainable road transportation.

Throughout America there is now more general public awareness that we live in a world of limited resources and that we need to value and preserve them. We as environmental practitioners know how to apply our knowledge to advance better transportation and land-use linkages, better urban planning and community interface, and more travel solutions. The Ten Toes Express is an innovative transit program launched this year by the St. Louis bi-state transit agency. It is a transit-oriented, walking guide for senior citizens to visit historic and cultural sites around the city as a form of fun, education, and exercise. St. Louis is just one of many transit-friendly cities in America, and one of the first cities

about 15 years ago to implement the Arts in Transit program within their transit expansion projects.

... trying to be someone else
was harder than it seemed
and somehow I got caught up in between
between my pride and my promise
between my lies and how the truth gets in
the way.¹

What and who are our influencers? What is it that holds us back or compels us to move forward? We cannot be the same people we are today, who are caught in our good intentions yet make the same choices. We all need to be changed in some way, to be transformed. Sometimes the journey from unknowing to knowing is better accomplished by seeing through another's eyes, borrowing for that moment their sense of being and place. Our self-concern tends to suffocate our empathy for others. For example, for those individuals who cannot afford a car, how do they get to work, to the grocery store, to church? What choices do they have when they travel? Are they close to a bus route? Do they have a friend or family member who can drive them to their destination? For lower-income individuals and families who rely on mass transit, how the transit system is integrated with other land uses and mode choices close to them is life important to their travel decisions and their well-being. The intersection of sidewalks, bike paths, and bus and rail rapid-transit lines may be the tipping point for whether they obtain and keep a family-supporting job.

Ultimately, we are all working toward a higher cause, serving the residents who

comprise the human fabric of the neighborhoods served by a transportation system. As environmental professionals, we work with residents, stakeholders, neighborhood leadership; we listen, consider, hopefully seeing as deeply as we can how others' views integrate with ours and how we can create grassroots approaches to improve quality of life and the value of the travel experience. Tony Hiss, in his new book *In Motion: The Experience of Travel*,² talks about the experience of deep travel. The point of travel is more than getting from point A to point B; it is first of all an experience, the experience itself of traveling to planned destinations. And then it is something more—the experience of the unplanned encounters along the way. We can teach ourselves to have more deep travel moments—both far from home and close to it. We can learn the human dimension of travel and our emotions associated with the choices we make. We just need to be leaders and step forward—set high standards, then exceed them—for it is then we move beyond the intent of our actions, which actually keep us at the periphery of our experiences, to real action in realizing our choices in motion.

Notes

1. From the song "In Between" from the album *Minutes to Midnight* by Linkin Park (Warner Bros., 2007).
2. Tony Hiss, *In Motion: The Experience of Travel* (Knopf, New York, 2010), 352 pp.