

Balance, Budget and Betweens

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I will use my experience, beginning mid-1996/97, working for the Federal Highway Administration as the basis for my comments today. I had as my goal or objective to further multi-agency ITS deployments. Most of what we had going on at that time were early deployments. So that is my foundation, and I will be speaking from that foundation. I will admit that this is sort of a touchy/feely subject – at least I think it leans to that – it is a bit of a study in organizational dynamics. I am not too technically prepared to talk about it, but I will give you some of my experiences. Bottom line, I want to simply talk about the three big challenges to ITS, the solutions to those, and relate to you some of my experiences and examples.

Common Vision. The first challenge that we face in our early deployment, without naming any guilty parties, is trying to reach that common vision. It is clear in the West that operations and maintenance are two distinctly different things and it will be a while before they come together. Local interests and regional interests just do not always match. I think we hit the nail on the head when it was said that transportation is the driver. I found this out working with Yellowstone National Park, for example. Transportation in Yellowstone National Park is not of a high priority for the Park Service, they have other “bees to kill” namely resource management.

Economics. Economics is a bit of a challenge here. There are economies of scale and then there is the tradition of investment that we are all familiar with – namely concrete and steel.

Sustainability. The last challenge relates to sustainability. We are so at risk in small departments, if one person retires or is reassigned, we lose a lot of momentum. Budget fluctuation is another one. We are going through this in Montana right now. The State dollars are so strapped, that they can’t even start

with the Federal Aid dollar – they don’t have room for them. They have so much federal aid that they have to come up with the statewide match, but on the other hand they can’t really start because everything is tied up.

Balance. So, the first solution we can talk about, we can reach with some balance by appealing to multiple goals. Often regional concerns are different than local concerns. If we can achieve different goals in a project we are much better off than a single focus goal. I think that a Traveler Information System is one that often speaks to a single goal, but sometimes it is hard to match interest. The other part that I have a hard time getting my hands around, but I see it in smaller organizations, is carrying responsibility and authority. Let me give you an example, the ability to carry responsibility and authority is not easily done. I always hear the remarks and the literature says that it is nice to have the “big boys” involved – they can plan on the dotted line. But from experience I have seen good organizations perform well with people – mid-level managers that do their sixty hours worth of work and then do another twenty because they are in love with the project. They just need to have the ability to carry the responsibility and authority to make it work and I will give you an example of that later on.

Budget. It has always been a killer that we can’t get multi-year reservations. Earmarks, for example, are a great way to get started. But if we are dependent upon Earmarks for success and they don’t come that’s an awful challenge.

Betweens. What else do we have here? What has been tremendously helpful both here and in other places I have been in is that we have a “betweenner”. That’s the buffer entity. It can be steering committee, a management consultant, or it could be academia that has a vested interest in the project succeeding. They really end up being a lot of the energy behind the effort. Not only that, they off-load the department with an

awful lot of administrative work which is important when you are trying to do your real job. It does, however, demand multiple years and sustained funding. It is hard for somebody to commit to a consulting contract when you don't have multiple years [lined out].

I want to get into some of my experiences. I just chose four that you are probably just as familiar with as I am.

GYRITS. About 2 ½ years ago, it appeared to me (reflecting my opinion then and not today) that [the Greater Yellowstone Rural ITS Project] was absolutely impossible due to economies of scale. It is difficult to attract the attention when you have such low volume. Even when you have a closure, we don't have that significant an event like you at during a weekend in Vail. You just don't stack up the cars. We had no budget outside the GYRITS project. We had no commitment for budget somewhere else. And we had a personnel change right in there in the middle, including one that was me which did stall the project a bit. Lastly, there is this operations void certainly from the Park's perspective. They have a natural resource management perspective and it is hard to get their attention very long about incident management.

DRCOG. That was the first example; this is one that I worked with while I was at the Denver Region Office. DRCOG - it might be my favorite MPO name, Denver Regional Council of Governments. In the MPO they had an arterial management program. Now this is unique because I only know of about 4 or 5 other MPOs in the country that offer this type of service. They actually put staff on the MPO to help local agencies manage their arterial system to coordinate and integrated the signals. It was a wonderful program. They thought that it was their corporate responsibility to go beyond just planning projects, which was largely funded by CFAC funds. They wanted to have staff available so that they could put staff on the street, collect data, go into the cabinets, and retime signals for these arterials that had many jurisdictions. They also met multiple goals of each entity in the region; namely safety, air

quality, feasibility, etc. Very good project, still sustained today.

ENTERPRISE. Here is one that I would [characterize], at least from my involvement and probably still today, as being primarily about early deployment research and post-adaptive deployments with participating agencies. But they have been around since 1991. It is a loose knit group that began as a pooled fund study. It had all the features to keep it going that I described earlier in the challenges. They had a "betweenner", a management consultant onboard – Castlerock – that puts a lot of effort (administrative work) to keep them on track.

I just want to make a remark about my involvement with Enterprise. John Whited, at the time, was vested with the responsibility to carry out some of their (Iowa DOT's) ITS deployment. He did about sixty or seventy hours a week on his regular job and then he'd put about thirty or forty hours in on Enterprise Project. He'd fly out to Colorado, see some of our early deployments down there, collect data, help Castlerock write the research report and then go back home to do his regular job. He was just a tremendous glue in that organization to help get that done, and [there were] others who I am not naming. But that was a key ingredient in the success of that organization.

AURORA. Another one that I began working with in 1995. I found them to be a very interesting group for their enthusiasm and how ran they ran the organization. It was another pooled fund effort that would sustain multiple years and multiple agencies. It seemed to me that it was largely just mid-management enthusiasm that keeps it going. Once again, one of the key ingredients, they have a budget set aside to hire a management consultant and they keep their work [progressing].

To sum it up, I don't see our dilemma in the West for multi-agency deployments changing. CANAMEX may offer one real hope there. There is some vision behind that that we don't have elsewhere. Until the economies of scale change, and I don't know how long that will take, we will probably be working like we are today for a few more years.