A Constituency for Mass Transit

Since the turn of the century, mass transit systems have been losing ground to their chief rival, the automobile, in part because mass transit has neither a cohesive nor a well-informed constituency. Last week in Washington, D.C., leaders from citizens' groups across the country, as well as government, labor, and business representatives, met for the first conference of its kind: a meeting, sponsored by the National Urban Coalition and the Conservation Foundation, to organize grass-roots leaders to push the nation into a reorientation of its transportation policies.

As California Assemblyman Willie Brown, cochairman of the conference with labor mediator Theodore W. Kheel, remarked: "There has never been a conference with a common denominator bringing together such a great variety of groups—the aged, poor, handicapped"—and the urban dwellers to whom a car is an expensive nuisance but a necessity.

Since transportation is regarded by many people as more of a problem than health, housing, or education, why have citizens taken so long to act? Hazel Henderson, a writer who is associated with numerous environmental and public interest groups, speculated that efforts have been fragmented and weakened by lack of communication between groups; and that transportation is usually a secondary concern of groups organized for other, more emotional, causes.

Thus, the only organized citizens' groups have been those formed on an emergency basis, often too late, to fight highways that threaten to tear apart urban parks and neighborhoods. The National Coalition on the Transportation Crisis was recently formed to coordinate the efforts of these groups, and a tiny lobby, the Highway Action Coalition, is seeking to push federal legislation favoring mass transit systems.

Unlike the freeway-fighters, the leadership conference has set itself the task not of "slaying dragons," but of inaugurating a long-term program to bring together all nonprofit organizations concerned with transportation and to educate the public on the alternatives to the automobile. As Kheel noted, "The mass transit people are still a minority—most people are not aware of how they are being hurt by the vast subsidies of the automobile."

Several speakers described how present laws, both state and federal, are all weighted toward perpetuating the growth of highways and encouraging the use of automobiles. Laws require that "user" taxes (on gasoline and car sales) be put into road construction. The Highway Trust Fund, set up in 1956 by the Interstate Highway Act, makes available $5 billion a year, for which the state share of costs is only 10 percent. Not until 1970 did Congress move, through the Urban Mass Transportation Assistance Act, to supply money for capital improvements (but no operating subsidies) for public transit systems. Less money—$10 billion over 12 years—is to be distributed under stricter matching requirements: $1 in local money for $2 from the government.

Speakers emphasized that mass transit systems cannot be self-supporting, but must be subsidized, just as automobile travel is. Some businessmen, believing that there is something wrong with the transit system if it can't be run on a "good sound business basis," bridle at this idea. So, apparently, does Under Secretary of Transportation James M. Beggs, who indicated that the areas in which rapid rail systems are being developed, such as San Francisco (*Science*, 19 March) and Washington, D.C., should be able to support them without government aid.

The new Citizens' Committee on Public Transportation says one of the first big steps will have to be made by Congress—in permitting some of the Highway Trust Fund money to go into mass transit. Beyond this, plans are vague, but there will be vehement policy declarations such as "no more urban freeways." More strategies will emerge from the "major" national conference on public transportation now being planned by the 71 participating organizations.—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

look at it egotistically. I feel very confused politically."

All those interviewed by *Science* stated adamantly that they wouldn't vote for Nixon in 1972. One engineer, a Democrat, now out of work for 6 weeks said that Nixon in 1968 "made some campaign statements about continuing aerospace. And I, like a damn fool, believed him. I got my wife to vote for him too. Now I'll vote for anybody but him. I'm not political, but I would even go out and campaign for a Democrat."

Another more militant view was "the government has enough weight to swing anything it wants. Nixon is on the side of the corporations. I feel plotted against. Nixon quashed the whole program. It was a plot."

From Now to 1972

In talking about their favorite alternative in 1972, the men all brought up the name of Hubert Humphrey—partly due to his connection with aerospace as Vice President and also from a conviction that only a Democratic administration would spend federal money in the amounts needed to get them back on their jobs.

None mentioned McGovern, Muskie, or Kennedy. And after an hour of round table political discussion no one had mentioned the war in Vietnam. When an outsider finally brought up the subject, the most militant of the group retorted, "what has the war got to do with it? It's irrelevant!"

Evidently many of the unemployed see their new hardships as a central fact. "They see their personal tragedy as a national disaster," one observer commented "They want to know why their problem can't be solved by rushing through Congress an aerospace Gulf of Tonkin resolution."

A more hopeful view of the problem comes from Congressman F. Bradford Morse, a Republican with a record of interest in problems of economic conversion. Morse told *Science* that in the next 2 years withdrawal from Vietnam and economic recovery will have the effect of reemploying many jobless. First, a Vietnam pullout will enable other defense projects now on ice to proceed, thus providing jobs. Second, a healthier economic picture will give those now jobless enough security to switch tracks and find work in other fields. But still undetermined is what long-term changes in viewpoint another year or two of unemployment will bring.—DEBORAH SHAPLEY