CONSUMERS AS PARTICIPANTS IN TRANSPORTATION PLANNING*

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ABSTRACT

Legal requirements for public participation in transportation planning increase the opportunity for transportation consumers to influence the design of systems they will use. However, the implementation of these requirements may also increase the possibility that system design will be dominated by the opinions of outspoken groups. This study postulates that public participation is biased, and seeks to test this proposition using data from an Oregon survey consisting of approximately 2,400 respondents. Using Automatic Interaction Detector and cross tabulation analyses, different participation rates were uncovered for groups identified by demographic, attitudinal and behavioral variables.

Introduction

The mandate for public inputs to the transportation planning process is now well established in the United States. Beginning with the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1970, Congress has required public inputs in making transportation decisions. The ability of the citizenry to provide adequate guidance to the planner is no longer in question since citizen participation is now required by law. The question at issue is merely the nature of this participation.

At the state level, Oregon, for example, has a Citizens' Advisory Committee, which is "to be comprised of people who reflect the whole range of community interests, concerns, and values" (Oregon Department of Transportation, 1975). The duties of this committee are to assist in determining goals for developing and maintaining the transportation planning study, to advise the Policy Body on community and other nontechnical issues, to review and recommend changes in the planning process, and to review project priority selection procedures.

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RESEARCH QUESTION

This paper is intended to present at least a partial answer to the following questions:

Are participants in transportation planning in fact a representative sample of the public-at-large? Alternately, as might be suspected, are they basically a self-selecting segment seeking to advocate particularistic viewpoints?

If the answer to the second question is affirmative, then there are others in the population who at best are underrepresented in the planning process, and who might have different kinds of demands to make on future transportation systems. From the standpoint of the planner, an uneven involvement in transportation planning may lead to a distortion of the public inputs. Systems designed in response to these inputs will not match the needs of prospective clients, and, therefore, will not be used.

Method

DATA

This study is based on a statewide survey of attitudes and descriptions of personal transportation behavior, conducted by the Oregon Department of Transportation. The survey, conducted in spring and summer of 1974, involved approximately 2,400 personal interviews. Several topics relevant to transportation planning within the state were investigated: response to the energy shortage, patronage of various modes of transportation, intentions to use new intercity transportation services if they were to become available, and attitudes towards state transportation planning.

VARIABLES

Respondents were asked if they would be willing to serve on a general transportation planning committee to the extent of two meetings per month. Their answers were measured with a simple "yes" or "no" response to this question. Willingness to participate was then evaluated with respect to three sets of potentially influencing variables: (1) socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of respondents, (2) behavior and expressed intentions towards specific modes of transportation, and (3) perceptions of and attitudes toward the performance and administration of the state transportation program.