What are decision makers looking for in transportation planning information? What content and formats are most useful in decision making? Understanding users’ information needs and the gap between those needs and planning and modeling capabilities should help define research needs in transportation planning and forecasting. This discussion focused on use of technical information in transportation decision making.

Preferred content and format of technical planning information

- Decision makers want the simplest information possible.
- Most transportation planning products are too technical; they are beyond the capabilities of many non-technical decision makers.
- Many decision makers want a recommendation, not the numbers which form the basis for that recommendation – but they want to know that the numbers exist.
- The summary of a planning report is the most important part. Long and detailed reports may be necessary to meet regulatory needs, but they do not influence the choice process much.
- Forecasts must be believable to the end users.
- Decision makers search for a credible information product. That seems to mean information that is consistent with common sense, having face validity.
- Face validity – apparent logic of forecasts – is more important to decision makers than technical details of the models.
- Some decision makers recognize that credibility of forecasts traces to model characteristics.
- GIS (map) output is desirable compared with text and tables because it is more understandable.
- Visualization is important, which makes microsimulation models especially desirable. Microsimulation brings modeling and evaluation results down to a form that looks realistic.
- Decision makers like individualized examples of benefits more than aggregate values. For example, estimated peak period point-to-point travel times in some future year, rather than vehicle miles of travel. What will each alternative do to the future travel experience of residents?
- Information should be focused on the projects and how they are expected to influence individuals, not on (aggregate) forecasts.
- Some decision makers recognize that there is uncertainty in the forecast, and would prefer to see ranges of values rather than point estimates.

Decision maker characteristics
• Policy board members do not understand models.
• They look to planners to use and interpret models.
• There is a knowledge or capability gap between planners and decision makers.
• Decision makers use different language than planners

The influence of transportation planners

• Planner credibility in the eyes of decision makers is very important in determining the influence of the information those planners provide.
• Planners get some of their credibility from their work with models – even if the models themselves are irrelevant to decision makers.
• Decision makers rely on planners much more than on models and their outputs.
• Transportation planners need to market their products (results) to decision makers. They need to adapt, deliver, explain, encourage the use of their information.

Forecasting errors

• Forecasts tend to underestimate demand (in rapid growth areas).
• Some decision makers question the integrity (veracity) of the models; they fear that the true story might kill the project.

Investing in improving transportation planning

• Desirable investments would shorten the process – especially environmental review (not a modeling problem, a participation and conflict resolution problem).

J.L. Schofer
July 3, 2004