

V. THE REVIEW

The North American Intermodal Transportation Summit in Perspective

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The challenge that we all face now is how to move ahead, how to make intermodalism a working reality for the 21st century. We need to build an understanding of the significance of intermodalism, create decision structures that go beyond traditional modal paradigms, and build new systems that recognize the real costs of each mode. By hosting the Summit, the University of Denver, the ITI faculty, and the ITI Board of Directors have demonstrated their commitment to intermodal education, research, and outreach. This is a meaningful first step on the long journey ahead.

PROGRESS TOWARD A NORTH AMERICAN INTERMODAL SYSTEM

The Summit provided many realistic perspectives on the progress that has been made in achieving intermodalism. Although numerous shortcomings were identified, it is striking that all of the participants essentially share a common vision, based on the following points:

- There is an urgent need to promote national and regional intermodal transportation systems for passengers and freight, within, among, and between countries, that appreciates the interests and concerns of all and enhances mobility in a way that is environmentally benign, safe and secure, efficient, and ethically based. Such a system will enhance national and regional competitiveness in the global economy.
- Historically, national transportation systems have been built on the basis of separate modes. Different modes have different strengths and weaknesses. Public policy as well as public and private investment should support the expansion of an intermodal system that will build on the strengths of each mode while reducing the overall adverse impacts of transportation.

- Existing transportation systems have contributed greatly to national development and to individual well being. Nevertheless, these systems confront nagging problems of congestion, pollution, safety and security, and energy consumption. Because of different national conditions, cultures and values, no single set of prescriptions is appropriate. Nevertheless, appropriate new policies can be devised through the creation of enhanced levels of cooperation in transportation by governments, key stakeholders, and the public.
- The role of intermodal transportation in reducing pollution and congestion will be largely determined by public policy at several levels of government and among various agencies at each level.
- The evolution of an intermodal passenger system lags behind that of the freight transportation system but deserves equal attention by policy makers as well as public and private investors.
- Technology represents an important part of any solution, for various innovations hold considerable promise to improve existing transportation problems. Technologies, however, are not panaceas and must be viewed within their socio-cultural contexts. Assessments should be carried out prior to implementation in order to identify and deal with potentially negative impacts.

Notwithstanding these common visions, there was a marked difference of opinions in the views of progress, as expressed by the nongovernmental representatives, on the one hand, and by the governmental representatives, on the other. The governmental representatives were far more optimistic about the progress that has been achieved than were the other participants who, to varying degrees, expressed their frustration with the status quo, especially in regards to specific barriers that continue to inhibit the achievement of an intermodal system for North America.

To illustrate, border crossings remain troublesome and a serious concern to the private sector. Although actions by governments and transportation companies have served to alleviate delays at highway and rail border crossings and have eliminated bottlenecks within countries, the growth in the volume of freight traffic overtakes the scale of past accomplishments and requires urgent policy attention.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE SUMMIT

The most obvious contribution of the North American Intermodal Transportation Summit is its identification of the specific problem areas that block the creation of a North American intermodal system. These can be summarized as follows:

- Nature of planning processes in governmental and private-sector organizations;

- Lack of financial resources for infrastructure;
- Limited cooperation among the modes;
- Unequal resource allocation to the modes;
- The need for governments and their agencies to think in intermodal rather than modal terms;
- Labor and management relations;
- The need to develop private-public partnerships;
- The need to improve the integration of transportation planning with environmental, energy, and other relevant agencies within each country;
- The lack of cooperative mechanisms among the countries to facilitate the achievement of a regional intermodal system; and,
- The need to deal with urban congestion issues and to emphasize passenger intermodalism within, between, and among cities.

The Summit, however, contributed to the development of an intermodal system for North America in more ways than merely identifying problems. It also accomplished the following:

- It enabled top transportation officials from Canada, Mexico, and the United States to outline their views of the future of intermodal transportation in a collective setting and to discuss policy issues privately.
- It brought transportation officials together with key stakeholders, pioneers in intermodalism, and academic experts who identified issues, problems, and obstacles that hinder the achievement of intermodalism.
- It began the process of outlining policies and actions that can help overcome the barriers identified.
- While these matters are difficult to deal with, because of the political implications that arise at a time when the role of the state in promoting intermodal transportation is still being defined, there was general agreement on the urgent need for further action involving academics, stakeholders, and policy makers.

The participants in the Summit represented government, industry, labor, and academia; however, notably missing among the participants were members of the legislative branch of government. In future meetings, key members of the legislature should be included in the proceedings, as it is they who will sponsor and enact legislation that will foster the development of intermodalism within, between, and among the three countries.