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# TRANSPORTATION PLANNING UNDER TWO MASTERS: CITIZEN PARTICIPATION, PLANNING STYLES, AND THE TUNNEL ROAD CONTROVERSY<sup>1</sup>

Jonathan Levine

## Introduction

Transportation planning, perhaps more than other areas of planning practice, suffers from a split identity. On the one hand it is an area in which engineering considerations frequently dominate, and many of its practitioners are in fact professional transportation engineers. On the other hand, it is a particularly politicized arena in which planners work, at least on the local level; virtually no planning issue can rally a neighborhood to political action as readily as a proposed freeway bisecting it. Even less controversial questions such as changes in bus service regularly elicit heated debate.

The clash of the political environment and the engineering mode of operation makes transportation planning a particularly interesting laboratory for an investigation into the uses of information in planning and the responses of planners to ambiguities in their practice. In particular, the input of citizen participation into the transportation planning process may shed light on some of these issues. Mandated by law and espoused by numerous scholars and practitioners,<sup>2</sup> citizen participation in transportation planning may be seen by the planners themselves as a "bizarre imposition from the outside by fuzzy minded, misguided forces [that can] only lead to bad planning."<sup>3</sup>

If some transportation planners and engineers have been unreceptive to citizen input, it may be due to the clarity with which they see their mandate; they optimize safety, capacity, and cost,<sup>4</sup> and citizen input can only blur their criteria for evaluation. That citizen input is desirable in order to determine the priorities of communities need not be argued here. More interesting is the question of what impact citizen participation has on planning and decision-making and how such input might be made more effective.

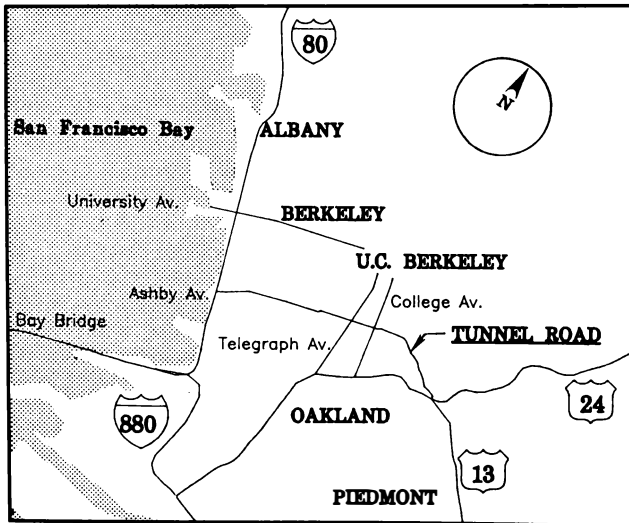
Citizen input is insufficient to ensure citizen influence; as Arnstein noted, there are many potential uses and abuses of citizen input apart from true participation in decision-making.<sup>5</sup> Though there can be no guarantee of effective influence, the kind of information citizens bring to bear, the processes by which they present their views, and the degree to which they are able to understand the planners' mode of thinking will all affect their influence over the process. In this paper I will examine a planning episode in which citizens attempted to influence

the outcome, but have thus far failed. Their failure may provide insights into developing more fruitful methods of input in the future. It is important to note that this paper does not focus on how the planner might elicit citizen input, but on how the citizen might influence transportation decision-making, and how the planner might respond to citizen input.

### **The Tunnel Road Controversy**

The episode in question in fact generated remarkable levels of citizen input. Berkeley's Tunnel Road serves as a link in the major corridor from communities south and east of Berkeley into the downtown and the campus area, as well as to Interstate 80 northbound (Figure 1). Though it is a residential street, it is a part of the state highway system (Route 13) and collects traffic from the freeway portion of Route 13 as well as Berkeley-bound traffic from Highway 24.

Traffic on the road is heavy, and though the asphalt is striped for single-lane use only, its width on the inbound side allows the formation of two lanes of traffic along much of the road's length, something that drivers do regularly. The two-lane operation of the road is purely ad hoc; its width is not sufficient for two official lanes of operation. As a part of the state highway system, Tunnel Road is operated by the



*Figure 1. Tunnel Road and Vicinity*



*Figure 2. Inbound automobiles "doubling up" in a single lane of Tunnel Road, 8:15 A.M., on a Tuesday morning (view to the southeast from Tunnel Road near Oakridge).*

California Department of Transportation, or CalTrans; the state agency would bear responsibility for any design changes.

The area adjoining Tunnel Road is well-to-do, and its politically active residents object to the heavy volume of traffic flowing through their neighborhood. Among the many controversies surrounding the road's operation is the question of whether it should continue to be used as an ad hoc two-lane facility or should be redesigned to allow one-lane use only. The latter option is favored by the residents for safety and aesthetics; CalTrans favors the status quo, chiefly to maintain the road's capacity. The City of Berkeley has no official position, and residents have petitioned both the City and CalTrans for improvement of the situation.

### The Use of Information

An assumption pervading much of the literature on citizen participation is that professionals respond best to professionally communicated information. Commenting on a common pitfall of citizen input, Bleiker writes: "Solutions proposed by laymen are not completely worked out, are put forward rather late in the process and often in the midst of controversy, and are generally communicated in such a manner that they are rejected out of hand by the professionals."<sup>6</sup> Manheim advocates closing this information gap by providing study information to citizens on procedures used in transportation planning.<sup>7</sup>

The presumption that planners respond best to a professional level of communication may well be true. But regardless of the nature of the communication, the processes by which it was developed and presented may determine its fate. Due to active citizens' groups and an involved Transportation Commission, the Tunnel Road controversy generated a large amount of citizen-planner communication. The variation in the sophistication, quantification, and professionalism of this information and its presentation allow an examination into a range of attempts to influence a planning process. Following is a sampling of types of citizen-produced information and planners' responses.<sup>8</sup>

### *Anecdotal Information*

The majority of neighborhood residents are neither planners nor engineers; the information that they feel most comfortable in presenting -- indeed the information that may be the most meaningful to them -- is personal stories and rich anecdotes. What occurs when these stories are heard by transportation planners is another matter.

For example, in 1985 a neighborhood resident wrote to the district director of CalTrans: "Recently I walked with my children to their schools along Tunnel Road...The experience left me so shaken that I now constantly fear for the safety of my children...They walk home after school every afternoon and Tunnel Road is the only route they can take. You might recall the accident last spring of a truck losing its brakes, hitting the sidewalk and overturning along precisely this stretch of Tunnel Road. I travel Tunnel Road almost daily and know that it's a dangerous street to drive on but it is ten times more dangerous for pedestrians. There have been many other less publicized accidents and near accidents. I witnessed one the day I accompanied my children to school. A car trying to pass another to the right scraped his tires on the curb and bounced back into traffic...[O]ne short stretch along Tunnel Road has no sidewalk forcing pedestrians into traffic with cars speeding by at 40 miles per hour."<sup>9</sup>

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In a similar vein, another neighborhood resident enclosed a clipping on the above-mentioned accident to the Berkeley City Manager, adding: "Had last Friday's accident happened at the time when children from the Bentley school walk down the road, this could have been a fatal one... Tunnel Road has been rightly called by a Berkeley journalist 'the narrowest unofficial highway in the world.' Needless to say, this is the most dangerous road to drive through in Berkeley."<sup>10</sup>

Such anecdotal information proved little to the CalTrans personnel. The response to the first letter read, in part: "...In regard to your other concerns, the accident rate on Tunnel Road is below the statewide average expected for this type of facility and changes to the roadway geometrics cannot be warranted on the basis of traffic safety. Further, reducing the roadway width to provide for one-lane operation in each direction would cause back-ups of 300 to 500 vehicles northbound in the A.M. peak hours. Since the back-up would start at the beginning of the one-lane restriction the back-up would extend well onto the high speed portion of Route 13. This would create serious safety and liability problems."<sup>11</sup>

Whether statistical information on the roadway's safety would have carried greater weight with the CalTrans personnel can only be answered speculatively; at the very least the CalTrans planners would have had to rebut it. But most likely a statistically based argument would have centered on the question of what is "this type of facility." The citizens would likely assert that Tunnel Road should be compared to other residential streets, while the planners would view it as merely one of a class of two-lane state highways running through urban areas,<sup>12</sup> though the road's status as neither a one-lane nor a two-lane facility would certainly hamper comparison with other roads.

### *Quasi-Technical Information*

Perhaps aware of the relative weakness of their position due to lack of technical information, the citizens may at times try to quantify their information for presentation to the planners. The results are sometimes humorous, but illustrate an important phenomenon; lay people feel a need to counter the technical information generated and demanded by the planners.

An example of this came not from Tunnel Road but from neighboring Ashby Avenue, another segment of State Route 13. The neighbors, lacking any objective measure of accident rates along their stretch of Ashby, did what planners do: they conducted a survey. By polling the participants at the organization meeting, they arrived at statistics on observed accidents, presented in the following manner to the Berkeley Transportation Commission:

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NAME	TYPE OF INJURY		
	AUTOMOBILE	ANIMAL	PERSON
Pauline Glaser	xxx		x
Jan Cecil	x	x	x
Maxine Emerson	(recent resident, no incidents yet)		

and so on.<sup>13</sup>

Another attempt at dealing with the planners' appetite for quantifiable data was made in 1980 by a Tunnel Road resident who attempted to counter the planners' expertise with professionalism of her own: "As a Statistician, I periodically make counts of the traffic passing 34 Tunnel Road. Since the opening of the new Highway 24, the traffic coming west on Tunnel Road has decreased slightly but the traffic going east has increased markedly."<sup>14</sup> Neither of these letters received a response, and there is little reason to suspect that transportation engineers or planners would have found them more convincing than information of the first type.

### *Professional Communication*

A more organized and relevant attempt to utilize professional credentials came several years later. In 1985 the residents concluded that the most productive approach to the CalTrans engineers would be through the presentation of concrete improvement proposals, and a member of their association who happened to be a practicing civil engineer prepared a detailed proposed plan for the road including sidewalks, parking bays, median dividers, and provisions for a single lane of traffic.<sup>15</sup> The plan was presented to City staff, one of whom lauded it as a "craftsman-like job."<sup>16</sup>

The plan was never adopted as city policy. Instead, the city staff acted in the capacity of a "mail carrier" in presenting the plan to the CalTrans engineers. "You tell us what you want, we'll pass it on" was the attitude of City staff, according to the plan's developer.<sup>17</sup>

The plan was rejected by CalTrans, as had been the previous proposals. The agency issued a plan of its own that restated its original concept for the road.<sup>18</sup> The plan included, incidentally, accident statistics indicating that for the city portion of Route 13 as a whole (including Ashby Avenue as well as Tunnel Road), accidents were double the statewide average for roads of that type,<sup>19</sup> though the accident rate for Tunnel Road specifically is in fact slightly lower than average.<sup>20</sup>

### **Reasons for Failure: Lessons from Planning Theory**

The process described above is a failure not because the citizens did not get what they wanted; there is no way of showing that their concerns need necessarily take precedence over those of CalTrans, the drivers, or the residents along alternate routes to which the drivers might be diverted through capacity restrictions. Rather, the failure is found in the utter lack of movement by either of the sides towards the other or even an acknowledgment of the other side's terms of reference. To the neighbors Tunnel Road is a neighborhood street, while to CalTrans it remains a legislatively mandated state highway. No common assumptions were developed; no shared approaches on how even to measure the problem were defined. The responsibility for this failure is shared by both the citizens and the planners involved.

#### *Framing of the Question*

A Transportation Commission release<sup>21</sup> from 1980 presents three possible options for Tunnel Road: maintaining the status quo, striping the road for two lanes, or creating a left-turn lane at the Hotel Claremont. The framing of the agenda was interesting in two regards. First of all it avoided any mention of the single-lane option, even though the option had been suggested in citizen letters at least as early as 1974. If this was an attempt to control debate it was unsuccessful; the single-lane proposal resurfaced quickly thereafter.

But perhaps more important to the ultimate "failure" referred to above, the agenda was framed so that the proposals were mutually exclusive, rather than in a fashion that would encourage the development of compromise proposals. That tone continues through the present day, with the one-lane and two-lane proposals being debated as though a unique determination needed to be reached between them. In fact, they may be compatible; two lanes or left-turning lanes may be provided in the vicinity of intersections, thus minimizing the reduction in traffic capacity.<sup>22</sup> Given the present polarized debate, this solution is unlikely to be reached, however. In a fashion similar to that described by Bleiker,<sup>23</sup> the opponents framed their debate in either/or terms, rather than in a more compromise-oriented style.

#### *Modes of Interaction*

In addition to a rigid framing of the issues, the mode of interaction adopted by the citizens was not conducive to any compromise solutions. Relations between the citizens and CalTrans personnel were maintained strictly at a written correspondence level, and face-to-face contact in small groups or even public hearings did not occur, at least for the past five years.<sup>24</sup>



Moreover, much of the communication was indirect. The citizens apparently perceived that the City of Berkeley is their representative to CalTrans, and that they were bound to route their proposals through City personnel. In fact nothing precludes direct citizen-CalTrans meetings; CalTrans personnel meet regularly with homeowners on similar issues.<sup>25</sup> The citizens' reliance on city personnel must be predicated either on an assumption that the city will adopt their plan as its own and will utilize its technical and political resources in presenting the plan to CalTrans, or alternatively on the assumption that the plan will be adopted on its merits independent of any city backing. In fact, the former assumption was the citizens' original hope; when that was proven wrong they chose to rely on the latter.

A more productive strategy might have been to bypass the City after the City's limited role became apparent, and to rely instead on face-to-face communication with the CalTrans personnel. Such an approach might have allowed the development of mutual understandings that could have formed the basis for the citizens' drafting of the plans for Tunnel Road. The citizen's plan as an accomplished fact apparently stood little chance of generating agreement despite its professional preparation.

### *Addressing Other Sides' Concerns*

A major task for both parties to such a face-to-face meeting is answering the concerns of the other side. On the surface, certain concerns in the Tunnel Road controversy were addressed by the parties involved. The citizens' concern about safety, for example, was answered through the use of accident statistics. The citizens may be forgiven if the response did not put their anxieties to rest; for them, CalTrans' statistics miss the point. Whether or not the road is less safe than average, they *feel* unsafe when they use it. The tangibility (to them) of the road's danger is a prime factor in the intensity and the lifespan of the controversy. The fact that they may be unable to articulate that sense of danger which is unanswerable by any statistic or the inappropriateness of the statistical measure itself has left them helpless in the face of the evidence.

If the CalTrans planners did not adequately answer the residents' safety worries, the residents probably did an even poorer job of addressing the planners' concerns. Their communication represented a progressively more refined version of their proposals, but never confronted the capacity issue, which was the planners' primary concern. There are a number of arguments the citizens might have raised, but, given the static and stilted process of communication with the agency, the citizens may not even have been fully aware of the planners' concerns. The citizens might legitimately have claimed, for example, that

capacity is primarily determined by number of lanes at intersections, as described above. They might have argued that, given the sizeable backups already existing, the extra impact of slightly diminished capacity would be barely felt. They might even have suggested that reduced capacity is desirable, either to encourage diversion of traffic to Telegraph Avenue (a wider commercial street), or to encourage transit use. These arguments were not unknown to the residents; in the words of the civil engineer who drafted the citizens' plan, "I could have made a case, but was never given a forum." In fact the forum of citizen-CalTrans meetings was always available but was unutilized. Agency personnel were thus not unjustified in feeling that the citizens had not attempted to answer their concerns: "The homeowners never addressed the question of backups."<sup>26</sup>

### *Engineering Thinking Applied to an Urban Issue*

In the current case, the planners are engineers; this fact brings out even more clearly the weaknesses of "rationalist"-style planning. The attempt to optimize certain values (in this case road capacity) under a system that is not designed to take immeasurables into account led to community alienation from the results of the process.

Moreover, disagreement remains on precisely what it is that the CalTrans engineers are maximizing. On the one hand, one CalTrans engineer stated: "We're concerned with safety, capacity and cost, with a strong emphasis on the safety."<sup>27</sup> The drafter of the citizens' plan had a different view of the agency's values: "The CalTrans guys are really pretty open [to citizen input]", he states, "but capacity is unbroachable. They will talk about anything but reducing capacity."<sup>28</sup>

### *Institutional and Political Factors*

The privilege and wealth of the Tunnel Road citizenry hardly places it in a class of communities requiring concerted efforts at empowerment. It nevertheless has meager means to force a bureaucracy into action. Apart from the large but unorganized driving population, CalTrans has no direct constituents, and in a case where the agency desires the maintenance of the status quo, there is no effective process to force review. Banfield<sup>29</sup> showed how veto groups may exist for virtually any change; far fewer groups have the ability to prod an agency into action.

The citizens attempted to enlist the City's political support; such backing never came, possibly due to concerns about capacity restrictions on traffic levels in other Berkeley neighborhoods. Further attempts at political backing were made through an appeal from Assemblyman Tom Bates.<sup>30</sup> These too proved an ineffective substitute for mechanisms to guarantee responsiveness to citizens among

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bureaucratic organizations. It may be that if CalTrans is to continue to operate highways that are viewed locally as neighborhood streets, an organizational structure based on subregional units or even locally elected directorates would be more responsive than the current structure. Alternatively, CalTrans might choose to return such streets to local control, something it has actually been trying to do in the case of Tunnel Road but has been hampered in doing by a number of political issues, including the one described in this paper.

An especially interesting element of the Tunnel Road controversy is the conscious use of ambiguity; by allowing Tunnel Road to remain as an ad hoc two-lane facility, CalTrans has decided not to decide. Striping for two-lane operation would be unacceptable from a design standpoint, while restricting the flow to a single lane is apparently untenable politically. The way out of the dilemma from the standpoint of the agency is apparently maintenance of an ambiguous status quo. The use of ambiguity to avoid difficult decisions in the legal sphere has been well-documented; it may be that ambiguous solutions to hard planning questions demand similar investigation.

### Conclusion

The importance of both face-to-face communications and responsive government structures is emphasized by their absence in the Tunnel Road controversy. The issue did not lack for citizen participation, nor for citizen-generated information. However, such information, when presented unprofessionally, is unfortunately dismissed as irrelevant. But, as the experience with the citizens' professionally prepared plan shows, professional-level communication can also be futile when no shared understandings of the planning issues and values involved have been developed through face-to-face communication. But information and communication, though necessary, may still be insufficient when the planning agency has not developed mechanisms to ensure responsiveness to the variety of claims it faces.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Apologies to Charles L. Drayton, author of *Transportation Under Two Masters* (Washington, D.C., National Law Book Company, 1946).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Hans Bleiker et al., "Community Interaction as an Integral Part of the Highway Decision-Making Process" (Washington, D.C.: Highway Research Record 356, 1971).

<sup>3</sup>Barry Wellman, "Public Participation in Transportation Planning," *Traffic Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (October 1977): 655.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 631.

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<sup>5</sup>Sherry R. Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, no. 4 (July 1969): 216-24.

<sup>6</sup>Bleiker et al., "Community Interaction."

<sup>7</sup>Marvin L. Manheim, "Transportation Decision Making: A Guide to Social and Environmental Considerations," National Cooperative Highway Research Program Report 156 (Transportation Research Board, National Research Council, 1975): 22.

<sup>8</sup>The reliance in this paper on written correspondence is due both to its availability after two to seven years and to the fact that communication between the citizens and CalTrans was in fact conducted almost exclusively in writing.

<sup>9</sup>Correspondence from Lin Dillingham, 240 Stonewall Road, Oakland, to Burch Bachtold, District 4 Director, CalTrans, dated October 12, 1985.

<sup>10</sup>Correspondence from Teresa Sevilla, 105 Tunnel Road, to Daniel Boggan, Jr., Berkeley City Manager, dated May 8, 1985.

<sup>11</sup>Correspondence from Lincoln Chu, Chief, Project Development "A" Branch, CalTrans, to Lin Dillingham, dated December 19, 1985.

<sup>12</sup>This is in fact the definition of "this type of facility" as used in CalTrans documents, per conversation with Richard Giegling of CalTrans, December 15, 1986.

<sup>13</sup>Letter from Earl Crabb, Committee for Ashby Residents, to the Berkeley Transportation Commission, dated January 20, 1981.

<sup>14</sup>Letter from Elizabeth Scott, 34 Tunnel Road, to the Berkeley Transportation Commission, December 22, 1980.

<sup>15</sup>Plan on file in Berkeley Traffic Engineering Department.

<sup>16</sup>Conversation with Charles DeLeuw, Berkeley Traffic Engineer, November 17, 1986.

<sup>17</sup>Conversation with Frank Cronin, member of Claremont-Elmwood Neighborhood Association and preparer of the Tunnel Road plan, November 19, 1986.

<sup>18</sup>"Route Concept Report for Route 13," (Draft) California Department of Transportation, June 7, 1985.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, 8.

<sup>20</sup>3.03 accidents per million vehicle miles as opposed to 3.09 average for a four-lane highway in urban areas, per conversation with Joe Battaglini, CalTrans, July 26 1987.

<sup>21</sup>"What Do You Think Should Be Done with Ashby and Tunnel Road (State Highway 13)?" Berkeley Transportation Commission press release for an early 1981 meeting; undated.

<sup>22</sup>Cronin, conversation on November 19, 1986.

<sup>23</sup>Bleiker et al., 28.

<sup>24</sup>Conversation with Frank Holtzapple, President, Claremont-Elmwood Neighborhood Association, December 14, 1986.

<sup>25</sup>Giegling, conversation on December 15, 1986.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Cronin, conversation on November 19, 1986.

<sup>29</sup> Edward C. Banfield, "Why Government Cannot Solve the Urban Problem," *Daedalus* (Fall 1968): 1237.

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Assemblyman Thomas H. Bates to Burch Bachtold, Director, Cal-Trans District 4, dated February 12, 1986.