

# Transportation in the cities: Pessimism over solutions

Despite the high social costs of the automobile experts despair of finding viable alternatives

by Richard H. Gilluly

Various facts about transportation are finally emerging in the United States. One is that urban mass transit systems in this country are woefully behind those in many other countries—in comfort, speed, safety and efficiency. Another is that the nation desperately needs urban mass transit; the automobile simply fails to serve many citizens—there are an estimated 78 million carless people—and those it does serve often are badly served. The third fact is that a city's transportation system is not an isolated, separable system of roads and tracks and stations. Rather it is an integral part of a total community, often largely determining its shape, future and social ambience. It may be in these areas that the automobile has most dismally failed.

Even Vice President Agnew, the keynote speaker at the recent Fifth International Conference on Urban Transportation in Pittsburgh, acknowledged many of these facts. But his remarks (apart from the usual jab at the New York Times) were mild, indeed, compared with those of some of the speakers. Yet there was a feeling that the key issue was too little discussed: How does a city get people to leave their cars at home and ride buses, trains, street cars and other kinds of "people movers" to and from work?

Technology is, of course, a large part of the answer to this question; if quiet, comfortable, convenient mass transit is provided, these amenities will encourage people to use it. And technology was certainly the emphasis at the conference, if not always in the formal agenda, then in the dozens of displays and their accompanying salesmen. The conference was partly a trade fair, and rightly so. When officials want to build mass transit systems, they must buy the hardware.

But if there was an air of optimistic and jovial salesmanship among technologists, there was bitter pessimism among some of the other speakers.

"What is it, then, that one needs to do about [urban transportation]?" asked Herbert J. Hollomon, provost of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "In the first instance, I am not at all sure anyone knows. I am not sure

that we are yet wise enough to know how to deal with incentives and disincentives, mostly of a political and social nature. . . .

"It is relatively easy for me, if I pay enough, to get adequate transportation. It is not my problem.

"It is the problem of the poor. It is the problem of the young. It is the problem of the aged, and it is the problem of all those who are disadvantaged within the economic system. . . . I don't think it is enough . . . to seek money for new technological solutions . . . for which there will be no market."

He despaired of finding solutions. "Taxes on cars, meter systems providing parking at real cost, rather than subsidized cost, are practical, are imaginative solutions, but probably politically impractical.

"It is my view that until we make substantial commitments, particularly to young people, to be concerned with and knowledgeable of not just the technology of transport but the political, social and economic boundaries which determine it, that it will not be possible to make a major impact on . . . the function of the cities and their decay."

The real costs of using the automobile and not building mass transit systems were described by Hollomon and by K. Leroy Irvis, the black majority leader of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. Irvis spoke mainly of social costs: "More than one-third of our population, some 78 million people, do not possess this package of instant freedom, the automobile. They are poor, or too young, or too old, or handicapped . . . and for the most part they are the inhabitants of our cities. . . . I know children who live in the city but have never been downtown because there is no convenient or economic or even available means of getting there. . . .

"With the advent of the automobile age, the skilled worker, the man with mobility options, deserted the city for the suburbs. Our city populations were suddenly isolated islands of the poor and unskilled, virtually imprisoned by their immobility. Even their places of employment—manufacturing, ware-

housing, hospitals and department stores—had moved to the suburbs beyond their economic reach and frequently beyond their extremely limited mobility. So there they sit and fester in the rotting cores of our cities, with the shopping centers, the job opportunities, the decent housing tantalizing them just beyond their reach. Small wonder that frustration has sometimes boiled over into antisocial acts."

Hollomon spoke of the economic costs: Urban transportation based on the automobile, costs, he said, "on the order of \$100 billion," annually. He reports that the real cost—"for . . . displacement of land, the change of property values, the traffic safety factors, the driveways, the street costs, the pollution costs, the health costs, the cost of welfare which is attributable to lack of mobility, the inability [by the poor] to reach certain schools"—is about a dollar a mile for each automobile. "Costs which are not borne by the individual driver." The dollar-a-mile figure comes from preliminary results of a study by the National Academy of Engineering; a study of the costs of automobile congestion, alone, in London, shows a cost of about a dollar a mile, he says.

Costs which could not be cranked into the NAE study include, he said, unemployment compensation, racial strife and crime.

". . . It is very clear," he continued, "that with a systems cost [for the automobile] on the order of 10 percent of the gross national product, and a cost which is incalculable in terms of esthetic and social values, that we need to look again, it seems to me, at the nature of the problem."

Hollomon added that compared with the size of the problem, the amount being spent is "minuscule," about \$50 million to \$60 million a year on research and development, for instance. "A problem of this sort needs the kind of intellectual educational support that a major social and urban problem affecting the whole of the fabric of society requires. . . . The support for educational and research activities is so narrow, so sporadic, so spread, that we will be unable, in my view, to train and develop the kind of manpower that this field needs."

A prime goal of research would be to find politically practical ways to create a market for urban mass transit. A report on one such effort provided almost the only encouraging nontechnological note at the conference. Two spokesmen from Wilmington, Del., said the new transit system there is an apparent success (SN: 9/18/71, p. 189). The reason: A public relations campaign that aimed at no cynical manipulations of citizens, but, rather, appealed "as best we could to their instincts and desire to help." □