

3/16/2000

## **Wooring Soccer Moms and Demonizing Welfare Mothers: A Legislative Context for Women's Travel**

*Addresses the political climate surrounding women's issues in transportation.*

**by Hank Dittmar,**

**Surface Transportation Policy Project**

### **Introduction**

One of the truly amazing stories of this otherwise low key Presidential election season has been the discovery and exploitation of a "new" demographic group -- the so-called "soccer mom." Pollsters, spinsters, pundits and columnists have all rushed to chronicle the existence of these middle to upper income women, who spend their suburban days and suburban nights shuttling in their Volvos or minivans between school, shopping trip and soccer game, often with a job sandwiched in between. The selection of New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman as the keynote speaker at the Republican Convention was widely seen as candidate Bob Dole's attempt to reach out to this new target group, in a clear vindication of the findings of the first conference on Women's Travel Issues nearly twenty years ago.

Of course the rush to reach out to the "soccer moms" by candidates of both political parties has not included serious discussion of the transportation and land use trends that have created their daily plight, or of the strategies available to government to deal with their problems. Instead the candidates focus on issues like education, abortion and values, and spin their messages to appeal to the supposed bent of this group. At the same time other political issues which could have significant impacts on women's travel and quality life are discussed without reference to their implications for women, including welfare reform, school choice and affirmative action. The one legislative initiative which has provided real tools to respond to women's travel needs -- the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, up for reauthorization next year -- is seen as a construction bill or jobs bill.

What are recent key legislative initiatives and how have they affected women's travel? What legislative issues are on the horizon and how will they be reflected in the demand for travel and in the satisfaction of that demand? And, finally, how can research and policy analysis help to better define these issues so that legislation and spending can be targeted to dealing with the

real problems of the so-called "soccer moms" and "welfare mothers", along with everybody for whom a category has not yet been invented?

### **Current Legislative Context for Women's Travel**

Arguably, women's travel patterns have been partly shaped by past transportation and land use policy, with the construction of the Interstate highways, beltways and bypasses contributing to the suburbanization of jobs and housing as women have entered the work force while continuing to perform child care and household manager roles. The resulting travel patterns have been well documented throughout this conference. With the completion of the overwhelming majority of the Interstate highway system in the late eighties, federal attention shifted to system management and dealing with problems like suburban congestion. The transportation legislation passed in 1991, called the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act or ISTEA, refocused attention and funding to metropolitan areas, revitalized the consideration of social, economic and environmental considerations through a planning and programming process, expanded the eligible uses of federal transportation funding and called for increased public and local government involvement.

ISTEA has been hailed as a much needed sea change and decried as the most anti-highway highway bill ever. ISTEA clearly provided many opportunities for improved consideration of women's travel issues in the transportation planning process, as well as for the development of innovative projects to eliminate barriers to transit use or ridesharing. In addition, the bill created something of a boom in transportation planning and research, by doubling planning funding and by creating a variety of new funding programs for transportation and travel behavior research.

While the ISTEA bill is clearly the major piece of legislation affecting women's travel in the past five or six years, other legislation can have impacts as well. The 1990 Amendments to the Clean Air Act, for example, more closely linked transportation spending and air quality attainment. In so doing the Amendments focused attention and research on travel demand modeling. Indeed, the transportation air quality conformity process has forced many metropolitan areas to undertake travel surveys and update and improve their models for the first time since the sixties. In addition, the Clean Air Act initially mandated the development of Employee Commute Option programs, intended to reduce single occupant driving to work. These employer oriented rideshare programs prompted research that identified child care responsibilities and the prospect of family emergencies during the work day as being significant barriers to ridesharing by women. In some companies, the result has been the institution of guaranteed ride home

programs and child care facilities in the work place. While the air quality benefits of these programs has been hotly debated, the quality of life improvement for women who participate has been undeniable.

President Clinton's issuance of the Executive Order on Environmental Justice, coupled with heightened enforcement of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, has raised awareness of the differential impacts of transportation decisions on communities of color. Some environmental justice advocates have begun to identify the need for involvement in planning by women of color, perhaps the single most underrepresented group in transportation decision making.

### **ISTEA's Impact on Women's Travel**

The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act promised change in the transportation arena in a number of areas. Two that bear attention are the impact of more flexible funding on women's travel choices and the impact of ISTEA's changes in the planning process. With respect to flexibility and expanded eligibility, ISTEA allowed almost 50% of former highway only funds to be used for a wide variety of purposes at state and local discretion. Some of the programs with a particular interest to researchers interested in women's travel issues are projects to provide day care at transit station in Cleveland, Southern California and the San Francisco Bay Area, programs to provide a guaranteed ride home being offered by transit agencies including the Virginia Railway Express, and a wide variety of ride sharing and commute option programs. In addition, programs to make transit more reliable and to provide traveler information have been promoted through Intelligent Transportation Systems funding. These and other innovative uses of transportation funding, including transit oriented development efforts nationwide and traffic calming projects intended to reduce the need for travel, need to be studied with respect to their impact on women's travel choices.

The changes to ISTEA's planning process have the potential of promoting greater understanding of the issue. Greater public involvement, improved models and expanded consideration of social issues all promise to break down the one-size-fits-all approach to transportation planning in favor of planning which acknowledges the diverse needs of different parts of the population, including women. Some five years after ISTEA's passage, all fifty states now have some form of long range plan completed with some level of public involvement and hundreds of metropolitan areas have completed transportation plans. By and large, these plans, though greatly improved, still do not adequately address the transportation needs of women for four reasons.

**Capital Project Emphasis.** First, transportation plans and models are still focused upon projecting the need and identifying the funding for new capital facilities, such as highways and transit lines. The planning process has not yet adapted to managing the transportation system to promote accessibility for different population groups. For example, programs to locate and quickly and safely remove stranded vehicles from the side of freeways can have a big impact on congestion and on women's fear of traveling, yet these kind of programs are not well analyzed by existing transportation models.

**Overemphasis on Rush Hour Work Trips.** Secondly, most transportation planning and modeling is based upon assessing the capacity of the system to handle rush hour loads and home-based-work trips, not off-peak, non home-based trips. This single-minded attention overemphasizes capacity considerations on major facilities and de-emphasizes the difficulties faced by women forced to trip chain, make suburb to suburb or inner city to suburb trips and generally lavishes funding and attention on the part of the travel market dominated by men. New research in activity patterns, non-work travel, barriers to transit use by women and off-peak suburban congestion promises to shed light on these problems, but most of this work is going on outside the context of the metropolitan planning process.

**Public Input.** Third, despite tremendous increases in public involvement programs in the preparation of metropolitan plans, involvement by women in the planning process still appears to be low. Transportation planners are still predominantly male and attendees at public involvement sessions appears to be predominantly male as well. One of the most ambitious and successful public involvement programs in the country was undertaken in Albany, New York as part of its "New Visions" effort. As part of an extensive documentation of their effort, the Albany planners logged respondents at each session. Only about thirty of 160 participants were female. Few public sessions feature child care, and fewer still offer transportation to and from the sessions. Most meetings are held during business hours in downtown locations, although this appears to be changing. More and more planners are learning to hold gatherings in the community in conjunction with existing neighborhood groups.

**Lip Service to Social Issues.** Finally, despite ISTEA provisions calling for consideration of social impacts, STPP's scan of metropolitan plans indicates that many consider social issues through a "check-off" process, where issues mandated by ISTEA are listed in a matrix in an appendix to the plan and a check mark indicates that the issues were considered.

ISTEA was indeed a major change for planners all over the country and the foregoing discussion is not meant to imply that it has not sparked an

improvement in transportation planning. Women's issues in transportation are, however, not adequately being considered in transportation plans. Perhaps the most encouraging long term trend is the great interest in transportation and livable communities, with projects aimed at transit and pedestrian oriented mixed use development and traffic calming underway all over the country.

ISTEA's reauthorization debate is already underway, with the bill scheduled to expire on September 30, 1997. Various proposals have been advanced by different interest groups, ranging from the "HIghway Only Transportation Efficiency Act" (HOT-TEA) proposed by the highway lobby to the various proposals for state level block grants being advance by state agencies. Local government, transit and environmental groups appear to be coalescing around incremental improvement of ISTEA.

### **A Preview of Coming Attractions -- Legislative Issues Which May Affect Women's Travel Patterns**

As important as it is, Federal transportation policy and investment is only one source of change in the way Americans will travel in coming years. Travel by women is no exception to this rule. This election and the 105th Congress will consider a number of issues which may have substantial impact on travel by women and families over the next few years. Each of these areas requires research and analysis; this listing is meant only to identify possible areas for further study.

**Welfare Reform.** The other image of women that has been exploited by politicians, their handlers and the media is the image of the "welfare mother", and indeed most welfare recipients are female. The impact of the welfare reform bill passed by the Congress and signed by the President this summer is just beginning to be felt. Surprisingly, many newspaper accounts are focusing on the spatial mismatch between the location of job seekers in center cities and rural areas and the location of jobs in the suburbs and the exurbs. The Washington Post reported last week that state welfare agencies are advising rural job seekers to move to cities to find jobs. Inner city residents are finding that transit connections to suburban jobs are unreliable and that employers are reluctant to hire transit dependent person. Clearly welfare to work programs will have a disproportionate impact on women, especially women with children.. Issues of job creation in cities and transit connections to existing jobs are likely both to heat up in the next session of Congress and to have a real impact on women's need for transportation services.

**School Choice and Charter Schools.** The state and local trend toward programs which allow parents to choose which public school their children will attend as well as the trend toward charter schools and school voucher systems is likely to have some impact as children are enrolled in schools increasingly dispersed across the metropolitan area. Couple this trend with the collapse of pupil transportation programs around the country and the trip to school begins to become a major component in family travel, with the major responsibility still being placed on women.

The ongoing efforts to eliminate affirmative action programs may affect women's opportunities for employment, particularly with respect to women of color. Also of potential importance are efforts at control of legal immigration.

### **Informing Future Legislation -- Suggestions for Research**

It often seems as though the political process is little influenced by research and analysis, but examples abound where relevant research and analysis has informed and advanced a political debate. Future research on women's travel can serve such a function, if the research agenda is developed in a way that recognizes the legislative context. ISTEA's reauthorization offers the opportunity for research to impact legislation, and it offers the opportunity to develop a research agenda that can help to eliminate some of the barriers to resolving women's transportation problems. The following is a list of research topics which could serve to aid in the legislative arena as well as in transportation planning and investment.

**Impacts of Demand Management on Women.** Most analyses of demand management strategies such as ridesharing, guaranteed ride home, and day care at transit has focused on the trip reduction and air quality impact of these programs. A compelling case can be made that the real impact of these programs is a quality of life impact for working women. Have women found these programs useful, do they provide a lifeline option, and what impact do they have on the employability of women with children?

**Activity Oriented Travel Research.** Continued study of the reasons people travel -- for work, shopping, education, recreation -- and the factors that influence their choices can help to develop new methods of analyzing the adequacy of the transportation system in satisfying women's travel needs.

**Understanding Suburban Travel.** Off-peak suburban congestion is becoming a perceived problem, especially by women. How real is this problem and how amenable is it to traffic management, neighborhood land

use strategies and traffic calming programs? Most evaluations of these strategies deal with rush hour work trips, not with off peak travel.

**Travel Needs in the Transition from Welfare to Work.** The spatial mismatch between those who need jobs and job locations has been well documented. Not so well documented are the travel patterns of welfare recipients, particularly female heads of household, and the way their household's travel needs affect their ability to seek and get to work. These issues may mitigate against reverse commute programs and toward place based strategies. Transit's adequacy in serving this market also needs to be assessed in more than an anecdotal way.

**Travel Needs of Female Immigrants.** In some metropolitan areas, legal immigration constitutes a major shift in the population, and, potentially, a major change in travel patterns. What are the travel needs of recent female immigrants and immigrant households? How do they change over time. Researchers speculate on their early transit dependence and transitions to automobility. Is this true?

**Trends in Pupil Transportation.** Women continue to be predominantly responsible for getting kids to school. What is the extent of the pull out in school bus service, and how has the loss of the neighborhood school impacted mode choice and travel patterns for the family. Do cities with school choice or voucher programs exhibit difference from cities which do not have such programs?

**Improving Public Involvement by Women in Transportation Planning.** What are current levels of involvement by women in ISTEA planning processes? Can involvement be improved by holding evening meetings, providing child care, or providing shuttle service? Would increased involvement result in the raising of different issues?

## **Conclusion**

It took almost twenty years for women's travel issues to move from a national conference to the notice of the political soothsayers and media mavens. Hopefully, the lag time between lip service and serious consideration of the policy issues in a legislative context will be much shorter.