

Idea Champions

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Idea Champions

For a thesis on the role of ideas in the public policy process, researcher Ron Fraser conducted interviews in 1992-1994 with 36 participants in the creation of ISTEA. One of his conclusions was that certain concepts, such as flexibility, were generally accepted by all parties. What was needed was to change the policy goal into a policy-in-fact:

The 1987-1991 policy subsystem did receive substantial help from idea champions. The more visible champions were Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a senior member of the Committee on Environment and Public Works, and Thomas Larson, the FHWA Administrator. Moynihan provided access to the legislative process for the actors organized into the STPP. Larson, on the other hand, served as both a linking pin between the Department of Transportation and both houses of Congress, and as a change agent within his own Department.

Larson worked to spread what he saw as a "new paradigm."

The paradigm shift that Larson was selling to other actors in the policy subsystem was based on his belief that the fundamental role of transportation was shifting from its traditional purpose—that of opening up new lands on the frontier and in suburbia—to a service-oriented focus. Highways of the future were no longer to be looked at as ends in themselves, but as efficient means to more wide-ranging economic and social goals.

Larson never convinced Moynihan of the need for the National Highway System. However, the two idea "entrepreneurs," as Fraser calls them, agreed on changes in other areas, including flexibility. In a diverse nation, Larson told Fraser, the one-size fits-all philosophy of the Interstate era "would not fly in the Congress at all." Flexibility "provided a needed common ground upon which legislators in Congress could overcome their political differences toward the emerging post-Interstate program." He added that flexibility is as "close to the heart of success as any feature of the bill."

During dozens of meetings, these intellectual men of vision built a professor-to-professor relationship of mutual respect that helped shape ISTEA.

Reference: Ron Fraser's *Policy Subsystems and the Idea Whose Time Has Come*, a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (George Mason University, Fall 1996).
