

INCLUSIVE TRANSIT:

Advancing Equity Through
Improved Access & Opportunity



TransitCenter is a foundation that works to improve urban mobility. We believe fresh thinking can change the transportation landscape and improve the overall livability of cities. We commission and conduct research, convene events, and produce publications that inform and improve public transit and urban transportation. For more information, please visit www.transitcenter.org.

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INCLUSIVE TRANSIT:

I. Inequitable Access to Opportunity

Access to high-quality public transportation can make cities more inclusive, increasing mobility and opportunity, particularly for people with low incomes and people of color. A community's agency in fair and just transportation planning and decision-making processes can lead to prioritizing transportation investments that better enable people to meet their day-to-day needs—getting to work, school, the grocery store, the doctor's office, and social and leisure activities. Allowing people to meet these needs creates long-term economic opportunities and helps people escape poverty, as can the jobs created directly via transportation investments. In addition to transit's well-documented environmental and economic benefits, public transportation can be a powerful tool to advance racial equity and social justice in American cities.

Yet typical transit agency equity policy consists of little more than the box-checking exercise required by federal "Title VI" regulation, which is designed to limit further harm to people of color—not to advance equity. Compliance with a hard-to-enforce federal statute¹ is not enough in cities striving to combat systemic inequities perpetuated by decades of racist housing policies that have excluded people of color from access to property wealth in cities. Transportation leaders have too often turned a blind eye to the historical and ongoing social justice implications of the institutions that build and operate transportation systems in the U.S.

The legacies of racist redlining policies and the construction of the interstate highway system vary from city to city, but they are pervasive throughout the U.S., with highway construction erasing African-American neighborhoods in cities from Syracuse to Little Rock to Baltimore to Minneapolis. Planners and policy-makers must engage with this history locally in order to make our cities inclusive places to live. Formerly red-lined urban neighborhoods often face the highest affordability and displacement risks when major real estate and transportation investments are made in large, growing cities—adding insult to decades of injury and generating inevitable pushback from long-time residents worried about cost of living and rent increases in their communities.



Boarding the bus in Dallas, Texas

In the meantime, many of the same funding and planning policies that gave rise to today's inequitable system continue to perpetuate disparate outcomes between haves and have-nots. This is especially apparent in the neglect of urban bus systems, which carry racial and cultural stigmas formed during the height of white flight in the 1960s and 70s. For example, a recent University of Texas report highlights, in the words of one commentator, "...how Dallas' income inequality and lack of upward mobility are directly related to the failures of its public transit agency²." The Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) system, which boasts the nation's "longest light rail network," appears to have lost sight of its mission to provide "efficient and effective" transportation that "improves the quality of life" for Dallas area residents.



Misplaced, inequitable planning and funding priorities are also apparent in the nation's largest transit market. At a cost of \$10 billion, New York City's East Side Access project is forecasted to support 162,000 daily trips from the city's Long Island suburbs once complete, while the city's bus riders—already taking two million trips daily—compete for budgetary table scraps. Long Island Railroad riders' median income is a staggering five times higher than New York City's median bus rider—\$144,251³ and \$28,455⁴, respectively. Regardless of Title VI, state and federal tax dollars are often allocated to projects that, on balance, widen gaps in transportation access for low-income/low-wealth people and people of color.

Much transit equity research to date has focused on federal policy, with limited planning-oriented guidance for local and regional public transportation practitioners. Transit equity research has also neglected the need for state, metropolitan, and local transportation funding and governance reform. These jurisdictions wield the most influence over transportation projects that could benefit people of color and people with low incomes.



Interstate 94 sliced through residential neighborhoods in Minneapolis in 1967



Milwaukee, WI, provides a relevant case study in the need for local, regional, and state reforms. The City of Milwaukee is one of the most segregated cities in the U.S., with just under 600,000 residents⁵. The Milwaukee region's total population is about 1.5 million. Yet the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC), Milwaukee's metropolitan planning organization, assigns an equal number of votes to each of its three member counties, including Walworth County (population: 100,000). The City of Milwaukee has zero votes⁶. To make matters worse, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation is among the most highway-oriented in the U.S., allocating more than 75 percent of its budget to highway maintenance and expansion and only 7 percent to transit—much higher and lower, respectively, than neighboring Michigan (45/28), Minnesota (36/21), Illinois (29/42), and Iowa (51/16), according to a 2012 analysis⁷.

Transit agencies cannot change toxic political dynamics, but they can structure policies and take actions that help restore a more equitable distribution of power. Making progress to advance equity is often dependent on action from elected officials, whose commitments to equitable transportation and housing policies will inevitably be tested by construction and real estate interests, “not in my backyard” opposition, and other well-funded, politically powerful constituencies. Nonetheless, savvy transit agencies and other transportation leaders can work to institutionalize planning practices that amplify good-faith community voices and reorient accountability structures to give low-income and communities of color agency in the planning and decision-making process.

Inclusive Transit identifies opportunities for public transportation planners and policy-makers who want to make their cities more inclusive. Transit agency- and local government-driven transit improvements are no substitute for state and national social policies, but local and regional transportation authorities can nonetheless make significant improvements to the lives of their low-income communities and communities of color. This paper provides a menu of case studies from which planners and policy-makers can identify practices that may apply in their local context. The cases explored and recommendations emphasized here are built on inspiration from and research conducted by leading social justice advocates—national organizations like PolicyLink and its Transportation Equity Caucus, the Center for Social Inclusion (now Race Forward), the Transportation Equity Network, and the Government Alliance on Race and Equity—scholars, and local and community-based transit advocates across the U.S.

While public transportation planning practice has lacked an explicit focus on closing accessibility gaps between underserved communities and the population at large, leading agencies have begun to identify and implement promising planning practices.



This research points to six clear, high-level takeaways:

1. Transit planning should reflect a redistributive funding and investment strategy to

support low-income riders

- The Minneapolis City Council passed an ordinance requiring equity to be an explicit consideration in the city's capital project selection for road improvements—an approach that transit agencies could easily replicate. King County Metro's ORCA LIFT program and Austin's Transit Empowerment Fund are two of a growing list of programs to provide discounted transit fares to low-income transit riders.

2. Transit access improvements should be targeted to benefit high-need communities

and informed by those communities' priorities

- The City of Seattle, King County Metro, and Puget Sound Regional Council have aligned transit equity policies at multiple levels of governance. Transit advocacy in New Orleans, New York, and beyond, has helped put a spotlight on improving local bus service—even in cities with rail networks. SFMTA's Muni Equity Strategy uses a mix of demographic information, existing transit quality, and stakeholder input to identify priority transit investment areas.

3. Community voices should directly inform transit decision-making

- New York City DOT's Street Ambassador program proactively engages community members to rebuild trust and ensure projects respond to community priorities. SFMTA's Muni Equity Strategy was designed in close collaboration with social justice and transportation advocates.

4. Transit planning should account for and improve housing affordability

- Metropolitan Planning Organizations in the Seattle region and Bay Area both conduct analyses to assess neighborhood-level risk for displacement. BART requires 20 percent of housing units in transit-oriented developments to be affordable, with a goal of achieving 35 percent. Metro Washington, D.C., and Metro Los Angeles both require affordable housing in joint developments, with Metro LA striving for 35 percent affordability.

5. Transit operations and capital projects should support employment in low-income

communities and communities of color

- The "Partnership to Achieve Comprehensive Equity" at King County Metro has created an ongoing dialog between the agency and union leadership to address equity issues in the workplace. The Minneapolis-St. Paul region's Metro Transit offered significant support to small businesses to help them stay open during Green Line construction.

6. Transit operations and planning should account for transit service's public health

and safety impacts

- NYC DOT coordinates bus infrastructure improvements with Vision Zero safety improvements for walking and biking safety along the same corridor. Portland's TriMet has updated its fare evasion enforcement regime to allow community service time in lieu of payment and to funnel first-time offenders into the agency's low-income fare program.

Incorporating equity goals, and equity-driven processes into the fabric of agency planning and policy decisions will require leadership and investment from multiple government stakeholder groups:

- Transit agency boards and senior leadership set agency policy and have the power to enshrine equity values in budgetary decisions, community outreach and engagement, and both project- and system-level planning analysis
- Public transportation planners and project managers can champion and implement inclusive outreach and engagement processes, and challenge outdated assumptions to ensure they conduct thorough planning analyses
- City and regional elected officials, who control key transportation and housing policy levers, have the same power to make equity a public priority reflected in strategic planning and policy-making and can coordinate land-use and transportation decisions to maximize affordable and equitable access to opportunity



NYCDOT Street Ambassadors conduct on-the-street transportation planning in Jamaica, Queens

II. Recommendations

Transit planning should reflect a redistributive funding and investment strategy to support low-income riders



- Ensure decision-makers reflect the communities they represent by making racial diversity a hiring criterion
- Make public input more accessible by conducting outreach in impacted communities, and going beyond traditional public meetings
- Build trust by leveraging existing community organizations and funding community members as intermediaries in the outreach process

Transit access improvements should be targeted to benefit high-need communities and informed by those communities' priorities



- Identify funding sources with greater proportional contributions from high wage-earners than from people with low incomes.
- Balance regressive funding sources by targeting investments in low-income communities and communities of color
- Prioritize investments in low-income and communities of color, regardless of funding source
- Pursue progressive fare policies to reduce financial burdens on low-income transit riders

Community voices should directly inform transit decision-making



- Coordinate inter-jurisdictional equity policies and definitions to align regional priorities
- Focus on improvements to bus systems people use before politically-driven capital projects
- Set transit investment priorities and performance metrics according to community values and local context, and report on performance transparently
- Use spatial analysis to identify and target transit investment to high-need populations
- Use qualitative data informed by community input to help ground spatial data findings

Transit planning should account for and improve housing affordability



- Identify housing displacement risk and account for that risk in planning process
- Encourage municipalities to reduce or eliminate parking requirements, and use zoning to increase housing affordability
- Actively pursue transit-oriented development, with strong affordability requirements

Transit operations and capital projects should support employment in low-income communities and communities of color



- Leverage transit operations and capital projects to create local community-based workforce development opportunities
- Reach out, plan for, and financially support mitigation of construction impacts on small- and local-businesses

Transit operations and planning should account for transit service's public health and safety impacts



- Assess and plan to mitigate possible adverse public health and environmental justice impacts in the planning process by race and income
- Rely on transit staff (not police) to handle routine fare enforcement, decriminalize fare evasion, and train enforcement staff in cultural competency
- Track and share enforcement data by race and income

III. The Landscape of Transportation Equity

Having access to fast, frequent, reliable, affordable transportation options creates economic opportunity. Recent studies find that short commute times are more strongly correlated to upward economic mobility than racial or income segregation⁸, and that urban sprawl itself—reinforced by car-oriented policies and urban design—limits upward mobility⁹.

In American cities today, personally owned vehicles almost universally provide residents with the most reliable transportation access, yet car ownership places a heavy financial burden on households¹⁰, comprising 29 percent of household budgets for low-income working families on average. Improved transit access helps low-income people escape poverty by providing them with a more affordable transportation option.¹¹

Car ownership costs are not only high but unpredictable, especially as the need for unexpected repairs emerges, or when people lose a job or experience other financial burdens. These factors cause low-income households to frequently go in and out of car ownership¹², adding uncertain transportation reliability to the list of things those households must deal with on a day-to-day basis. And to make matters worse, the income gains associated with car ownership can be more than offset by additional vehicle expenses¹³. Seven percent of White American households do not own a car, compared to 13 percent of Hispanic and 20 percent of African-American households¹⁴.

Transit is already a force for advancing equity in many communities, but it could be much more effective. People with low incomes and people of color rely on public transportation to meet their needs more often than the population at large. 24 percent of transit riders are African-American, compared to 12 percent of the U.S. population as a whole. 13 percent of U.S. households have income under \$15,000, compared to 21 percent of transit riders¹⁵. In small and mid-sized transit markets, this number is even higher, at approximately 45 percent¹⁶, and even in Los Angeles, the second-largest transit market in the U.S., the median bus rider makes just under \$15,000¹⁷. Among the top-ten cities ranked by transit quality in the Center for Neighborhood Technology's AllTransit tool, Washington, D.C., and Jersey City and Newark, NJ, are the only three cities where all-day high-frequency transit is accessible to a smaller proportion of low-income households than to their average resident¹⁸.

The same policies and planning practices that led to structural inequalities, over-investment in highways, and sprawling land use patterns have rendered public transportation inaccessible to many who would benefit from it. The Center for Neighborhood Technology estimates that only 25 percent of American households with no car live within a half-mile of transit at all¹⁹, let alone the frequent, reliably available, walking-accessible transit that connects key activity centers to enable members of those households to rely on transit for a diversity of trip purposes.

TITLE VI ANALYSIS

Federally-mandated Title VI service and fare change analyses have been designed to limit additional harm to people of color due to service and fare changes specifically, but do little to advance equity practice more broadly. Title VI requirements' flexibility may be necessary to make a broad, Federal mandate viable, but this flexibility can undermine the efficacy of Title VI when agencies are not careful about defining what constitutes a "major service change" or a "disparate impact".

Additional flexibility in technical Title VI guidance can also make the results of a service change analysis less meaningful. For example, the FTA allows agencies to optionally use demographic information from the census or from on-board rider surveys—in other words, either to assess impacts on riders or to assess impacts on nearby residents. Practice varies widely, and these approaches are not substitutes—they answer entirely different questions, either or both of which might be important to assessing the impact of a given service change.

Title VI provides an important safeguard against some forms of further regression, but its limitations make Title VI compliance a bare-minimum standard, not evidence of a commitment to equity.

DEFINING TRANSPORTATION EQUITY

Practitioners, advocates, and other experts alike find it challenging to agree on a definition of equity, in large part due to its complexity and context-sensitivity²⁰. Still, equity definitions and frameworks consistently emphasize the importance of both meaningfully engaging and targeting investment in low-income and communities of color—communities who are typically not represented in planning processes, in the planning profession, or in agency leadership positions.

TransitCenter considers transportation equity to be improved when transportation policies or investments make cities more inclusive by ensuring that transportation benefits accrue more so (and burdens less so) in low-income and communities of color than to the population in general. This is most likely to happen as a result of actively and meaningfully engaging low-income and communities of color to understand their needs and priorities, including equity criteria in decision-making across the board, and going above and beyond to target investments in areas where the need is greatest. City, transit, regional, and state agencies and officials have essential roles to play in advancing transportation equity through this "targeted investment" approach, as do civic advocates, who have often been the driving force behind the strongest transportation equity efforts.

A targeted approach to transportation equity must be context-sensitive because the injustices that cities must work to address are themselves context-specific. Transit planning strategies intended to reduce income and wealth-inequality must be tailored to address cities' and neighborhoods' unique economic, cultural, demographic, geographic, and political histories—histories that have placed systematically unfair burdens on people of color and people with low incomes.

In many contexts, public transportation is an important means of reducing those burdens, and in doing so making transportation systems more equitable (to define transit equity, just replace "transportation" with "transit" in the definition above). Still, transit equity is most meaningful when considered in a broader context—the transportation inequities that transit can help alleviate today are the result of transportation policies and practices that go far beyond the transit industry's area of influence.

IV. Equity Practice in 2018

Transportation investments can perpetuate or exacerbate inequality unless planners and decision-makers take deliberate, consistent action to advance racial equity and social justice through new policies and projects. This brief presents examples of equity-driven decision-making practice, rooted in a framework of four key questions, adapted from Karner et al. (2016), that planners and policy-makers should answer in order to understand how their decisions can promote inclusion and equal access to opportunity.²¹

Question	Related practices
Who decides?	Fair representation among decision-makers; inclusive outreach; cultivating trust in government
Who pays?	Identifying progressive transit funding sources; equitable funding priorities; making transit fares affordable
Who benefits?	Targeting investments in underserved communities to improve access; focusing attention on buses; maximizing housing and transportation affordability; supporting high-quality employment
Who suffers?	Minimizing public health impacts; climate change impacts; reducing crash incidence; reducing police interactions on transit and inequitable, punitive enforcement



Seattle residents signing up for a discounted ORCA LIFT card

Advancing equity means adopting policy to embed equity values throughout the planning process. Investment in affordable, high-quality public transportation can be a valuable strategy to advance racial equity and social justice in cities, especially relative to an automobile-oriented baseline. Improved equity is not, however, an automatic outcome of transit investment, but rather requires complex trade-offs made throughout the project planning and implementation process.

Many equity interventions have outcomes that require new thinking and different measures of success, including many which cannot be quantified; have yet to yield any results; or have not been reported on in detail. The transit industry needs varied approaches, including different kinds of evaluation processes and more in-depth case study research to uncover these methods and stories. In the meantime, this paper provides a menu of possibilities rather than a prescriptive list of actions for any agency to take.

Most importantly, public agencies should consider the pursuit of equity as a central part of their mission, cutting across their portfolio of work—not a separate issue to be addressed, or a box to be checked as part of the planning process. While many equity-oriented practices may be implemented by planning staff and analysts, integrating equity into the fabric of an agency's work ultimately requires leadership from transit agency executives and board members, who are ultimately responsible for setting agencies' policy and budgetary priorities.

V. Emphasizing community voices & diversifying transit decision-makers

Policies and projects are unlikely to improve racial equity and social justice outcomes when low-income and communities of color are not adequately represented among decision-makers, or when those communities have no realistic means of participating in the decision-making process. Planning processes can also be intentionally or unintentionally designed to exclude or devalue input from low-income and communities of color, highlighting the importance of inclusive and creative community engagement processes.

Inclusive community engagement is transparent in its process, goals, decision-making criteria, and the specific role the community is being asked to play²². Additionally, it allows people to participate fully by providing resources that allow all community members to participate. Communities should expect their input to influence decision-making via consideration in the planning process, with agencies reporting back along the way on what they have heard and why input is or is not ultimately incorporated. Without this proactive, direct engagement, communities' trust in government can erode. An environment of distrust breeds knee-jerk community resistance to any project, even equity-advancing projects intended to address problems identified by communities themselves. Building meaningful relationships in communities—directly and via community-based organizations—can generate new project ideas, improve the impact and quality of planned projects, and can facilitate project implementation.

DIVERSIFYING TRANSIT DECISION-MAKERS

Agencies committed to achieving racial equity and social justice outcomes should strive for representation of their low-income and communities of color among agency leadership, which can be the most direct means of ensuring that those communities' voices are heard in decision-making processes. This is relevant for both agency board appointees and agency hiring. Transit agencies often have commitments to diversity in their general hiring practices, but such commitments can be better reflected among operations and maintenance staff than among planners, senior leadership, and board members.

A 2007 TCRP report found that transit agencies were at the time frequently non-compliant in reporting staff diversity data, and among those who did report women were consistently underrepresented, as were Hispanic and American Indian men²³. The same report recommends that agencies make diverse hiring an agency-wide priority, then hold those with hiring authority across the agency accountable to that priority. Other research from the Brookings Institution shows a persistent anti-urban and racially imbalanced bias in the governance of Metropolitan Planning Organizations, which are responsible for allocating federal transportation funds across the country²⁴. Recent research has also shed light on specific imbalances in board composition in Atlanta, Boston, Portland, OR²⁵, and Chicago²⁶.

The Untokening, a collective of mobility justice leaders of color, has also written about this issue in the context of advocacy organizations and recommends embracing diversity “disruption” and casting a wide net (including beyond the transportation industry) to help diversify the candidate pool²⁷. Advocates and several elected officials in the Portland, OR, metro region in early 2018 called for their regional transit agency, TriMet, to halt and reconsider its hiring process for a new General Manager, citing a lack of both community engagement and consideration of external candidates, especially women or people of color²⁸. While TriMet notes that semi-finalists for the General Manager position included three African-American candidates, two of whom were women, and four white men²⁹, the TriMet Board of Directors still declined to reconsider its final choice for the General Manager position, former COO Doug Kelsey.

ADOPTING NEW MODELS FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement is a means to understanding communities' priorities so that transit can better meet their needs—not a box to check during the planning process. Making public transportation systems more equitable means addressing the specific needs and priorities of underserved communities within each system's context. This requires “meeting people where they are” for strategic planning and project-specific outreach and engagement alike. In addition to direct outreach and engagement to individuals in low-income and communities of color, civic organizations embedded in those communities can provide important, holistic insights into their communities' priorities that may not be obvious to agency staff working within subject matter silos. This form of ‘qualitative’ priority-assessment is critical in particular because of the shortcomings of census and other data sources commonly used in transit planning.

It is often hard for low-income residents to attend traditional public planning meetings due to time constraints, limited mobility, or other barriers. Many residents also do not trust the agencies leading public planning processes, sometimes due to historical betrayals of trust when community input has either not been effectively solicited or input has been ignored. Rebuilding this trust and/or finding ways to solicit useful input in the face of community distrust is a central challenge of inclusive outreach.

backyards to make it easier for those residents to contribute. The Maryland Transit Administration ran an “Info Bus” along bus routes to raise awareness about its impending bus network redesign, staffed with agency experts who could answer riders’ questions about the new network³⁰. The City of Boston Transportation Department’s “Go Boston 2030” planning process included a mobile “Ideas on the Street” workshop that visited 31 neighborhoods within the span of a month, collecting suggestions to include in the final plan³¹. New York City DOT’s Street Ambassador program applies a similar approach, with a focus on building trust through long-term engagement in low-income communities and communities of color. Transportation improvements are often not the first priority in these communities. A dedicated bus lane, for example, might be the last thing a community dealing with low employment and high gun violence rates is thinking about—challenges that breed rightful distrust of government, particularly related to racial profiling and the school-to-prison pipeline. While the transit improvement an agency is proposing might improve access to opportunity, those benefits may not be obvious or may not feel urgent. Rebuilding trust by establishing a consistent presence in these communities is essential to developing a shared understanding of the role that improved transportation access can play in addressing communities’ most pressing challenges in the long-term.

Cultivating trust through long-term engagement is the foundation of the Street Ambassadors’ approach. The Street Ambassadors’ multilingual team starts by visiting natural gathering places near a relevant project area, like shopping centers and community events, to build a baseline of understanding. This initial outreach could include a needs assessment survey and/or submitting work order requests for simple, short-term fixes like pothole or street light repair. After conducting follow-up data analysis and planning, the team returns to the same sites, shares what they have learned, and introduces some possible solutions to the community-identified problems to seek additional feedback. Once community members are aware of and included in the process, they gain more trust in the data and more trust that NYC DOT is addressing its community’s needs. Those community members draw connections to their own lives and are more likely to become advocates for projects that they have helped shape.

ALLOWING COMMUNITIES TO TAKE THE LEAD

Agencies at various level of governance are using novel approaches to amplify the voices of disadvantaged populations, particularly those whose voices are often not heard in conventional planning processes. Some of the most successful public engagement strategies to date have relied heavily on partnerships with civic organizations. Social service providers, community-based organizations like Ride New Orleans, and community leaders and organizers are often best in touch with transit riders’ most pressing needs and priorities. In the cases of Plan Bay Area and Minneapolis-area Metro Transit’s Green Line planning processes, community organizations played crucial roles in making those processes more inclusive. Political leadership and funding can be necessary to allow these organizations to fully participate (e.g. through grants or contracts to support community engagement³²). It can also be strategically prudent to involve communities in planning processes early on, for example to help identify needed projects or to establish project goals and evaluation criteria. Proactive, genuine engagement is likely to reduce the likelihood (or at least the magnitude) of community-driven opposition to project proposals later in the process³³.



Go Boston 2030 outreach team





historically been pushed for and advanced by communities, whose efforts provide key lessons for government officials who are ready to lead as well. In the Bay Area, a coalition of community organizations came together in 2011 to provide input in the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC)-managed Plan Bay Area process by creating the “6 Wins Network”. This network of groups set an equity agenda including advancing affordable housing, robust and affordable local transit service, investment without displacement, healthy and safe communities, economic opportunity, and community power. Through the 6 Wins Network, these groups prepared an alternative Equity, Environment, and Jobs regional plan, which was analyzed and deemed the “environmentally superior alternative”, and recommended a set of equity-focused principles that are reflected in the final, award-winning regional plan. The 6 Wins Network continues to engage in ongoing Plan Bay Area updates.^{34/35}

The SFMTA later took a more proactive role to incorporate social justice principles and community engagement in its strategic planning process, eventually leading to the published Muni Equity Strategy (MES). SFMTA developed the MES in coordination with the Transportation Justice Coalition, a broad coalition of transportation and housing advocates from across the City of San Francisco. The MES emphasizes short-term actions and long-term policies the transit agency can use to improve opportunity for the city’s highest-need populations, in particular low-income residents and residents of color³⁷. Recent academic work has also drawn inspiration from participatory budgeting and proposed that agencies dedicate a stream of funds to be controlled directly by community leaders³⁸.



connecting Minneapolis and St. Paul that opened in 2014, has been widely cited as an example of how interventions from advocates, foundations, and public agencies helped change the project to better serve disadvantaged neighborhoods and mitigate disruption to them.

As originally planned, the Green Line included stations a mile apart in low-income neighborhoods, as opposed to a quarter-mile in downtown Minneapolis. Impacted areas included historically Black neighborhoods like Rondo that were heavily disrupted by I-94 construction in 1968, resulting in lingering distrust of transportation planners. Green Line project planners argued that, at the time, federal guidelines required them to keep stations widely spaced. Groups like the Alliance for Metropolitan Stability and Asian Economic Development Corporation organized the “Stops For All” campaign and convinced the Federal Transit Administration to change the way it rated transit projects. Three stations were then added in low-income neighborhoods.

In 2012, the District Councils Collaborative of St. Paul and Minneapolis expanded project outreach in the corridor by hiring nine “trusted advocates”—people with organizing experience who lived or worked in the corridor, rode transit regularly, and had a connection with an underrepresented group. The “trusted advocates” connected with 1,200 individuals in the project area, while Metro Transit’s traditional public engagement processes garnered 91 attendees at public workshops and 800 written comments³⁸. Paying these advocates to work on behalf of the agency was important in recognition of the significant value the agency derived from their work, and to enable organizations and individuals to participate who may not otherwise have the financial resources to do so.

Businesses along corridors with heavy construction can lose substantial revenues due to less foot and vehicle traffic, construction noise, and/or lack of accessibility during construction. Small businesses are especially vulnerable to these challenges and are owned by people of color at a higher rate than large businesses. Area foundations, nonprofits, and local governments in Minneapolis-St. Paul ultimately spent \$16 million on measures to reduce the impact of rail construction on businesses along the Green Line corridor, roughly 20 percent of which were black or Asian-owned businesses³⁹. These included:

- *A \$4 million “Ready For Rail” forgivable loan program for small businesses that demonstrated loss of sales during construction;*
- *A business outreach program that provided free accounting, design, and marketing assistance (for example, helping businesses create logos, websites and listings on third-party websites). Over 300 small businesses in the corridor received design and marketing assistance, with the average business receiving 80 hours of one-on-one assistance; and*
- *Contract provisions that incentivized or required transit contractors to minimize disruption to local business (for example, by creating construction employee parking plans so construction workers did not park in customer spots).*

The Central Corridor Funders Collaborative, a group of 14 foundations, helped instigate and support many of the programs described here—as well as additional efforts such as local workforce hiring, station-area cultural initiatives, and affordable housing financing. Philanthropic organizations can support equitable planning and outreach efforts by providing funding for work that may challenge public agency orthodoxy.

A recent report by the Greenlining Institute proposes a more generalized “Mobility Equity Framework”, with three steps (and more details in the report):

- *Identify the mobility needs of a specific low-income community of color*
- *Conduct the mobility equity analysis to prioritize transportation modes that best meet those needs while maximizing benefits and minimizing burdens*
- *Place decision-making power in the hands of the local community⁴⁰*



VI. Redistributive funding & investment strategies to support low-income riders

Transportation capital and operations projects (or even transportation systems taken as a whole) are commonly funded with a combination of various tax revenues and transit fares, and they impose indirect monetary costs on households by virtue of their implications for car ownership and housing affordability⁴¹. Sales tax increases—a common revenue source for public transportation system expansions—are regressive, meaning they impose a greater financial burden on low-income households than on high-income households (as a percentage of income). Car-oriented policies at the local, state, and national levels have effectively required low-income households to dedicate a substantial percentage of their income to car ownership in order to get around reliably.

Transit agency fare policy can also place disproportionate burdens on low-income households. To alleviate this burden, transit agencies typically work with social service providers to offer discounted transit fares to their clients. A growing list of agencies has worked with local government to identify funding to expand low-income fare offerings more broadly to all low-income residents in a city or service area, via programs including Austin's Transit Empowerment Fund and the Seattle region's ORCA LIFT program. The combination of direct and indirect monetary costs imposed on residents also impacts equity. Progressive funding schemes—those which place higher proportional cost burdens on wealthier households—help redistribute cost burdens equitably, though prioritizing investments in low-income and communities of color is also necessary for equitable funding allocation. Funding sources are typically determined by elected officials and the voting public rather than by agencies themselves, but agencies can play important roles in advocating for specific revenue sources when opportunities arise and can use their specific portfolio of revenue sources as an important input in their spending allocation process.

UNDERSTANDING EQUITY IMPLICATIONS OF TRANSPORTATION FUNDING SOURCES AND PRIORITIES

An expansive 2011 TCRP report reviews the equity implications of transit funding and financing schemes⁴². Sales tax funds are regressive because lower-income households pay a higher percentage of their total income and do so regardless of how much they drive or use public transportation. Gas taxes and other user fees place funding burdens more fairly according to infrastructure utilization. Business taxes can also provide significant funding.

Property taxes are relatively progressive since land-owners tend to be wealthier—but value capture funds (i.e. from tax-increment financing) can perpetuate inequities if, as in Atlanta⁴³, those funds must be spent in the immediate vicinity of the relevant project, which are likely to be in wealthy or gentrifying neighborhoods. Indeed, deciding to fund a transit project via value capture in effect establishes gentrification as a goal necessary to the project's success, rather than a potential negative impact for existing low-income residents. Value capture schemes can be alluring as a new revenue source, but they can also be opaque, can be driven by real estate interests rather than communities, and can lead to prioritizing capital-intensive rail expansion projects rather than maintenance or improvements to existing service.

The net equity impact of tolling or road pricing schemes depends on the nature of the toll; who drives, when, and where; and how revenue is allocated⁴⁴. In New York City, the travelers likely to bear the highest cost of a hypothetical congestion pricing policy are disproportionately the city and region's higher-income residents, and plans proposed by advocates and leading experts alike would allocate revenues to improve the city's public transportation system. For these reasons, social justice advocates have endorsed a proposed plan and praised its positive equity implications⁴⁵. A similar San Francisco proposal in 2010 cited the fact that less than five percent of peak-hour single-occupancy vehicle drivers are also people with low incomes⁴⁶.

TARGETING SPENDING TO BENEFIT THOSE WHO NEED IT MOST

Transportation spending has often prioritized high-cost capital projects—most notably highway infrastructure, but within public transportation including commuter, light rail, and even bus rapid transit service, for example—that serve relatively wealthy and less diverse constituencies than, for example, increased operational funding for local bus service. Attracting new riders, even in small numbers, can be prioritized to the detriment of projects that would improve service for existing riders, when in reality both goals are important. These decisions are often driven by regional politics, particularly when suburban jurisdictions are overrepresented on transit agency boards. The inequitable result is costly transit lines that run to low-density suburbs, yielding anemic ridership and wasting taxpayer dollars to support low-quality, financially inefficient transit service to the people who need it least—often in service of political optics, financial gains for real estate owners and the construction industry, and the mythical (and debunked⁴⁷) “choice rider”.

The ongoing suburbanization of poverty complicates this dynamic and creates new challenges, as shifting demographics erode the long-standing alignment between the geographies best-suited to transit investment (high density, inner-city areas) and low-income and people of color.^{48/49}

Inequities can also arise when funding is reallocated from high-cost capital projects. The State of Maryland’s 2015 cancellation of funding to support the Red Line light rail project is a particularly egregious case. The \$2.9 billion Red Line would have provided improved transportation access particularly to low-income, communities of color in Baltimore, and Governor Larry Hogan canceled the project in favor of funding highway capacity projects throughout the rest of the state. To compensate, the state pledged a comparatively meager \$135 million to the Maryland MTA’s “BaltimoreLink” bus network redesign. Maryland also maintained its pledge to fund the Purple Line METRO extension, a similarly expensive rail project serving the comparatively wealthy Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC.

On the other side of the DC metro region, the Commonwealth of Virginia has adopted a performance-based budget-allocation scheme that prioritizes investments on the basis of transparent criteria applied consistently to every project—a process mandated by state legislation. The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) SMART SCALE program awards points to projects that are projected to improve access to jobs for low-income, minority, and limited-English-speaking residents, explicitly embedding equity-advancing principles in the agency’s decision-making process⁵⁰. The program’s technocratic design limits the potential for discriminatory political influence, though it does not ensure that equity-advancing projects will receive funding because its equity criterion is only one factor among many.

The Minneapolis City Council also passed a capital spending resolution for street maintenance and safety improvements in April 2016, with a mandate to advance equity. With this mandate, City of Minneapolis staff developed a set of quantitative and qualitative project evaluation criteria in which nearly 50 percent of possible points are awarded based on concentration of people of color, low-income populations, low vehicle-ownership, and overall population density. As a result, while 23 percent of city streets run through areas of concentrated poverty where residents are mainly persons of color, 40 percent of the projects funded in the capital program through 2022 are located in those areas⁵¹.

MAKING TRANSIT FARE POLICY MORE PROGRESSIVE

One policy lever over which transit agencies typically have direct control is the ability to change transit fares. Reducing fares in general (or foregoing fare increases), restructuring fares to be more equitable and income-based, or providing more accessible means of paying for transit fares are each means of advancing equity and mitigating disparate cost burdens—provided that any resulting revenue losses do not necessitate service cuts for the same riders who will benefit from the discounts.

The most equitable fare structure depends on context-specific travel patterns. For example, distance-based fares will tend to be more equitable when wealthier riders tend to travel farther than low-income riders. In New York City, however, where many low-income residents and people of color have especially long transit commutes, New York City Transit’s flat intra-city fare (with free bus-to-subway transfers) is likely more equitable.

In part due to community concerns about perpetuating unequal transit access, Capital Metro eliminated a “Premium Fare” for its MetroRapid express bus service (which had been set at \$1.75 per trip rather than \$1.25 for other local bus services).



Advocacy for the ORCA LIFT discount fare card



Fare-capping on a TriMet hop pass, Portland OR



Not only did this simplify an unintuitive fare structure, under which transfer fares did not apply to MetroRapid and a ‘basic’ daily or monthly pass failed to provide access to the agency’s most useful routes, but ridership gains have more than compensated for per-rider revenue loss.

Transportation advocates, community-based organizations, and other local leaders advocated successfully for an affordable fare program for low-income transit riders. Facilitated by the digital, account-based ORCA fare card system, King County (which oversees King County Metro, Seattle’s bus transit provider) ultimately created the ORCA LIFT program, which launched in March 2015.

Under the ORCA LIFT program, King County residents making income less than double the federal poverty level are eligible for \$1.50 transit fares (relative to \$2.50 - \$3.25 distance- and time-based fares). Income-based eligibility and ORCA LIFT fare-card distribution are facilitated by existing social service providers in partnership with King County Metro. Some of ORCA LIFT’s affordability benefits are blunted by the fact that more than 50 percent of King County Metro’s funding now comes from sales tax revenue. Still, almost five million trips were taken using the program in 2016⁵², and regional rail provider Sound Transit joined the program in March 2016.

Portland’s TriMet plans to launch a similar fare discount program in July 2018, following successful local advocacy efforts led by Organizing People/Activating Leaders (OPAL). Under this program, TriMet riders at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level will be eligible for half-price adult single and day passes as well as 72 percent off month and annual passes.

While discounts for seniors, military veterans, and students are relatively common at agencies around the country, fare discount programs for low-income transit riders—arguably those who most need the discount—are just beginning to gain traction. The Austin, TX, region’s “Transit Empowerment Fund” (TEF) is another example. The TEF—cofounded by regional transit provider Capital Metro and One Voice Central Texas, a coalition of local health and human services nonprofits, and funded primarily by Capital Metro—is administered by an independent volunteer board, and sells discounted transit passes from Capital Metro to local organizations providing social services in high-need communities. These community-based social service organizations then distribute transit passes to low-income residents, enabling more than 3 million rides to date⁵³.

Low income riders may pay more to ride transit if they are unable to afford the up-front cost of a discounted pass. Transport for London (TfL) was among the first agencies to implement a policy called “fare capping”, which reduces inequities driven by the relative ease of buying discounted daily, weekly, or monthly transit passes for higher-income riders. When customers using TfL’s account-based fare payment system to purchase single-fare tickets have spent money equivalent to the cost of a monthly unlimited transit pass during a given month, TfL rewards those customers by converting their next single-fare ticket into an unlimited transit pass for the remainder of the month⁵⁴.

Fare-capping policies create a de-facto payment plan for low-income riders, for whom it can be a burden to pay the up-front cost of a monthly unlimited pass at the beginning of every month. Monthly passes provide discounted fares for a transit system’s most committed riders—fare-capping makes that benefit available to all its frequent riders rather than just those who can afford to buy a monthly pass at the beginning of the month. In the U.S., Portland’s TriMet and San Jose’s Valley Transit Authority have implemented fare-capping regimes, and Dallas’ DART plans to implement fare-capping in August 2018.



VII. Targeting transit access improvements in low-income and communities of color

Investing in high-quality transit can help make transportation access more equal over time, but outdated methods and flawed assumptions can undermine the efficacy of current planning methods and analysis. This can take subtle and more obvious forms. The American Community Survey, for example, emphasizes commute-based trips across an industry that relies heavily on the data source. The result is over-represented travel patterns for working-age men and a failure to account for trips made for child care, grocery shopping, and other activities that are disproportionately taken by women, children, and the elderly⁵⁵.

The industry-standard “Title VI” analysis, a federal Civil Rights law compliance requirement, does not require a rigorous standard for evaluating whether planned projects, service cuts, or fare changes are likely to create disparate impacts on communities of color. Many transportation model assumptions are based on population averages that do not account for variation in travel preferences by race. Gentrification and displacement can erode transit access in central, transit-rich areas as low-income people move toward the suburbs⁵⁶. These types of assumptions must be acknowledged, accounted for, and challenged in any planning process that aspires to make cities more inclusive.

Opportunities to improve transportation access in the near-term come from inter-agency equity policy coordination, advocacy for improvements to local bus networks—long neglected by transit policy-makers—implementing data-driven monitoring to measure progress and using demographic and transit service analysis to target investments in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color.

COMBINING REGIONAL EFFORTS TO IMPROVE EQUITY OUTCOMES

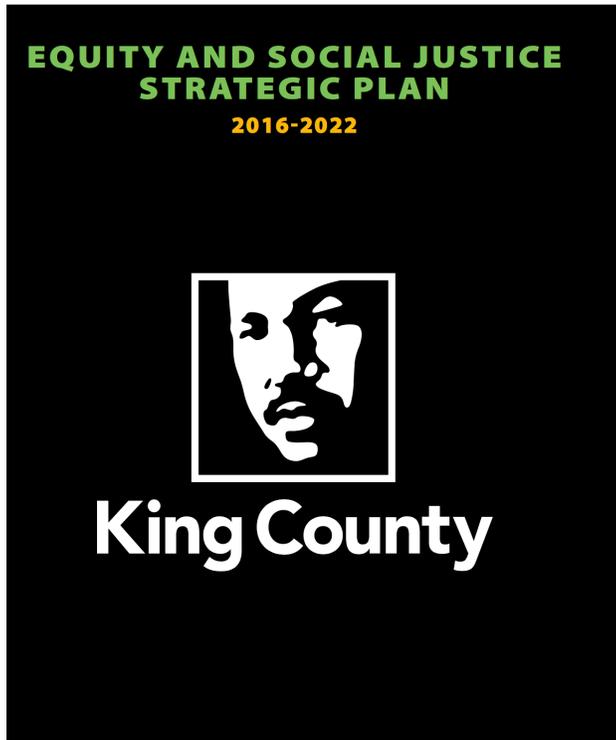
As the Center for Social Inclusion writes, regional policy and planning coordination is essential to advancing equity, but presents a major challenge: Even when planning agencies have the best intentions to meet and engage one another, capacity to do so is often limited as resources are scarce and staff ability to engage in meaningful relationship with other agencies is stretched because of competing interests and, at times, a lack of mutual understanding around shared goals⁵⁷.

The Seattle region is one that has coordinated transportation equity policies effectively, with agencies in the region highlighted repeatedly in recent transportation equity reviews—especially the City of Seattle, King County Metro, and the Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC). Sound Transit also recently approved three large affordable housing TOD projects on agency property and is developing an equitable regional TOD strategy. These agencies are bolstered by strong civic organizations like Puget Sound Sage, the Transportation Choices Coalition, and other groups that together comprise the “Transit Equity Alliance”, which worked to advance the ORCA LIFT program, as well as multiple transit funding ballot measures⁵⁸. The most recent funding package, “Sound Transit 3”, requires Sound Transit to sell 80 percent of surplus land for affordable housing use, adds incentives for Sound Transit to create jobs with living wages, adds stations in low-income communities, creates new funding sources dedicated to improving walk and bike access to transit, and allows the agency to charge for parking at all stations⁵⁹. These policy features help offset the regressive nature of the funding package’s sales tax source.

Having active engagement in advancing transportation equity from a robust civic sector and each of Seattle’s key transportation agencies creates opportunities to coordinate regional transportation and housing policies. Such coordination is essential to providing affordable housing and transportation access to people of color, people with low incomes, and other underserved communities.

The City of Seattle’s Race and Social Justice Initiative published an “Inclusive Outreach and Public Engagement Guide”, which includes a checklist/worksheet for use in developing an inclusive engagement strategy for any City policy outreach effort⁶⁰. The Race and Social Justice Initiative informs Seattle’s Transportation Equity Program, recently formed and now with two dedicated staff members housed at the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT). The program’s guiding principles are to build community trust through engagement and accountability (e.g. by supplementing the agency’s outreach efforts in low-income communities and communities of color), provide affordable transportation options (e.g. by advancing and administering programs like ORCA LIFT, discounted carsharing, and a pilot program to provide discounted youth transit passes), and create opportunities for communities to thrive in place⁶¹. SDOT applies these principles through established processes and protocols like the city’s Racial Equity Toolkit.

King County Metro’s “Equity and Social Justice Strategic Plan” includes strategic priorities to invest upstream and where needs are greatest, in communities, and in employees, with a commitment to accountable and transparent leadership⁶². King County Metro also developed a robust performance measurement system⁶³, and requires a three-part equity analysis for all new policies, starting with a screening process to daylight potential equity issues; the application of a tool used to quantify the impact of those issues; and a more in-depth, qualitative review of ‘major’ issues⁶⁴.



King County Metro’s Equity and Social Justice Strategic Plan

The Puget Sound Regional Council’s “Regional Equity Network: Growing Transit Communities” program—supported by a grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Sustainable Communities program—funded community-based organizations as a core part of the program’s community outreach strategy, leveraging those organizations’ strong community ties to augment regional planning efforts⁶⁴.

Opposition from a vocal, change-resistant minority often stands in the way of implementing projects that serve city-wide transportation goals and/or populations that most need improvements to transportation access. Planners who listen and build community relationships in good faith must still be able to distinguish between community priorities and the priorities of those who strive above all else to maintain the status quo. Regional coordination, leadership from elected officials, and clear public communication of goals and policy priorities can help agencies respond to and overcome “not in my backyard” project opposition.

New Orleans: A Case Study in Inequitable Transit Access

The regional transit network in New Orleans provides a cautionary tale of how public transportation can reinforce existing inequality. Along racial lines, more than 40 percent of white residents in New Orleans have access to frequent transit at rush hour or better, while only 20 percent of black residents do⁶⁵. Part of this reality is due to legacy streetcar investments (the St. Charles streetcar has been in operation since 1835), and part is due to a persistent emphasis on high-cost streetcar expansion, even after the entire transit network was decimated by Hurricane Katrina.

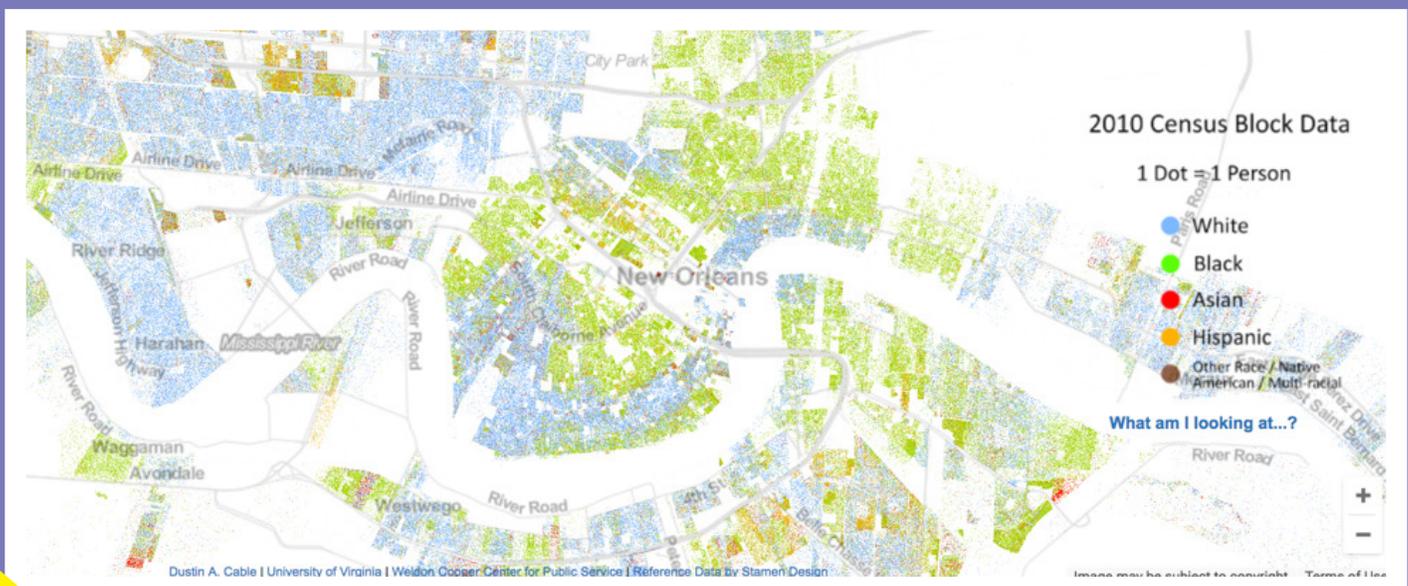
For example, a \$75 million streetcar expansion (the Loyola/Rampart/St. Claude line) slightly decreased overall job access via transit for nearby residents due to parallel cuts in bus service that served more destinations. In contrast, a nearly cost-neutral bus service change (reconnecting two bus routes to their original terminus) enabled residents along those corridors to access 5,000 more jobs⁶⁶. This level of disparity calls into question the goals of this recent streetcar expansion. While real estate developers and nearby land owners surely benefitted from the streetcar's construction, transit riders seem to have in some cases lost access.

The central equity issue in New Orleans' transit network is clear: The Regional Transit Authority's transit network does not target high-quality transit service in low-income neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color.

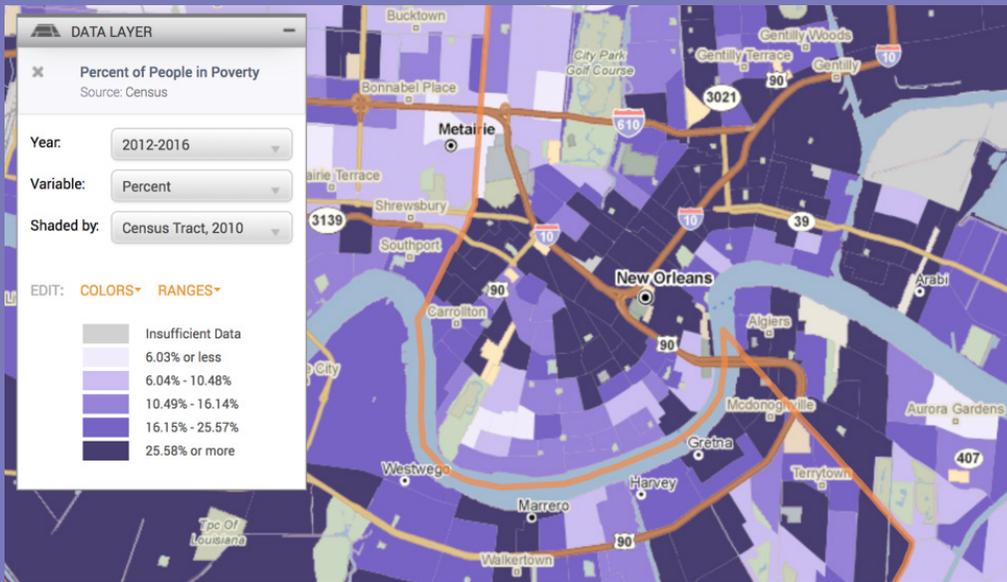
Here is a map of population with walking access to high-quality transit⁶⁸:



The map of high-quality service closely resembles the concentration of white residents in the city center:⁶⁹



High-quality service also aligns strongly with low concentrations of poverty⁷⁰:



The failure to align public transportation service with the populations who rely most heavily on transit is not just a shortcoming of equity planning, but a shortcoming of the region’s transit planning. The same low-income residents and people of color who are disproportionately excluded from the transit system today are also the New Orleans residents who are most likely to be regular transit riders.

LOCAL BUS SYSTEM IMPROVEMENTS

Civic groups and social justice organizations are often the most effective advocates for low income communities and communities of color in local and regional policy conversations. Ride New Orleans is one such organization, formed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina to advocate for transit riders as the transit system recovered from the storm’s devastating impacts. Ride has emphasized the importance of restoring bus service throughout the region, to best serve New Orleans’ residents and employers.

Ride’s advocacy starts with understanding community concerns. By working with riders to set the organization’s agenda, Ride ensures that it is building campaigns that people care about. Through its engagement efforts, Ride has identified strategic priorities like improved service frequency and reliability, facilitated cross-county travel, and improved stop and station amenities. In part as a result of Ride’s advocacy, the Regional Transit Authority (RTA) undertook a major strategic planning effort that recommended a number of policies for which Ride has advocated, including a new high-frequency transit network, improved bus stop facilities, higher-quality open data, and a series of goals tied to clear performance measures and targets⁷¹.

This is a stark contrast with the RTA’s emphasis on restoring service to and growing the city’s streetcar network, which carries fewer people, is more expensive to operate, and whose ridership is skewed toward tourists and other recreational users. Focusing on shiny, high-cost transit investments with limited transportation benefit is commonplace among businesses and elected officials who value economic development and increasing property values over real improvements in transportation access.

Improved bus service could meet the need for improved transit in most American cities, but buses are often treated as a second-class transportation mode.

Buses in America carry racial and cultural stigmas formed during the height of white flight in the 60s and 70s in cities across the U.S., stigmas that are exacerbated by the fact that bus service in the U.S. is often not very good. Buses are also less profitable for transit engineering and manufacturing firms, and buses do not offer conventional ribbon-cutting opportunities for politicians hungry for their next photo-op. Bus service can and should be better, and that will help reduce the stigmas—but when politics and/or profit drive transit investment, transit access improvements and addressing real community priorities become secondary (which in turn, ironically, undermines transit’s political and economic benefits).

To combat these implicit, inequality-reinforcing assumptions, Ride grounds its claims with its own spatial analysis of the region’s demographics, job centers, and transit service—using this analysis to identify service gaps that create or perpetuate transportation inequities in the region. In its 2016 “State of Transit in New Orleans” report, for example, Ride analyzed service frequencies by route (comparing pre-Katrina service levels to current service levels) and analyzed access to jobs for people driving relative to people using transit⁷².

BUS ADVOCACY

In New York City, a coalition of four transit advocacy groups (Riders Alliance, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, Straphangers, and TransitCenter) comprise the Bus Turnaround coalition, a city-wide initiative to elevate buses in New York City's political dialog. Starved for attention from local and state politicians and neglected by Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) leadership, New York City's bus system has been losing ridership for more than a decade. Bus riders taking more than two million trips daily in New York City are lower-income and more likely to be people of color than subway riders, who are in turn lower-income and more diverse than drivers.

The Bus Turnaround coalition advocates for solutions to be implemented by both the MTA and the NYC Department of Transportation, including bus-only lanes, a new fare payment system, allowing riders to board buses through all doors, implementing "transit signal priority", and overall agency reform needed to make buses work for the people who rely on them. Solving these problems requires the political will to allocate funding, street space, and staff time to bus riders, who have traditionally had a weaker voice in the city's political discourse⁷⁴.

Since the Turnaround coalition launched in July 2016, the MTA has acknowledged the bus system's problems and committed to address them, launched a new procurement for transit-signal priority technology, and published a new performance dashboard featuring metrics called for by the coalition. At the City of New York, the Department of Transportation issued a "Bus Forward" plan committing to expanding the City's role in improving bus service, and the Comptroller's office issued a report echoing the coalition's recommendations for citywide bus improvements. Most recently, New York City Transit issued a sweeping "Bus Action Plan" whose priorities largely parallel the recommendations of the Turnaround Campaign⁷⁵.

Bus-focused transit advocacy campaigns in New Orleans, New York, Chicago, Boston, and elsewhere reflect the importance of reimagining city and transit agency policy, and striving for high-quality bus service. A growing toolbox of bus service improvements can improve transit access without accelerating displacement. Strong advocacy is often necessary to build political support for bus service improvements, especially among key elected officials. Bus improvements are likely to be resisted by car drivers and the disproportionately powerful political stakeholders who represent them—even when improvements are clearly merited due to existing transportation patterns, forecasted growth, or community desires.





MEASURING PROGRESS

Transit and regional agencies should routinely assess both short- and long-term investment and service needs, particularly in low-income and communities of color, as these needs change over time. Where do people of color lack access to jobs? In which neighborhoods are low-income residents at high risk of displacement⁷⁵? Where are the cultural centers of various communities and how and when are people accessing them?

Any policy program to improve transportation access in low-income and communities of color needs a clear baseline and performance measurement framework, including concrete performance metrics tied to program goals, which should be informed by the same communities⁷⁶. Planning analysis and performance reporting on equity initiatives requires disaggregating metrics at a minimum by race and income, and conducting spatially-explicit analysis. Potential data of interest, depending on the project, could include demographic and socioeconomic data, destination access, commute time/distance, vehicle ownership, housing and transportation cost/affordability⁷⁷.

Specific metrics should be chosen to support specific programs or projects and informed by community residents who understand on-the-ground local context—specific transportation access and related disparities can vary substantially from place to place. The City of Oakland’s Equity Dashboard, for example, is a flexible interface through which planners can overlay various demographic characteristics with planned projects and other spatial layers of interest⁷⁸.

Experts and practitioners have identified access to destinations (most commonly jobs, but ideally including other place-types like places of worship, cultural and community spaces, healthcare facilities, schools, and grocery stores) as an important equity performance metric⁷⁹. This is in part because a city or region can provide improved access by increasing housing and amenities availability and by improving transportation connections. This creates positive incentives for growing affordable housing stocks, attracting accessible jobs, and improving transit quality^{80/81}. Accessibility-driven performance analysis has been operationalized as part of the planning process by a growing list of agencies, including Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission’s (DVRPC) “equity through access” program⁸² and Virginia DOT’s SMART SCALE capital funding allocation program⁸³.

Data quality is an overriding challenge throughout this work, as census data become quickly outdated, masking potentially important short-term changes, for example in housing market dynamics. The choice of geographic resolution for spatial analysis carries implications about where within a census tract, for example, population is distributed, which can have significant implications for transit access analysis. Furthermore, agencies of different sizes and budgets have wildly different technical capabilities.

Quantitative analysis will never be sufficient to understand the nuances of equity priorities in local communities with unique needs. Local planners and policy makers should cross-reference their quantitative analysis with community members' own understanding of their neighborhoods and the city at large, relying on expertise from the very people facing the challenges that equity policies and planning effort seek to address. If a quantitative analysis does not align with stated community priorities, planners must interrogate their assumptions to understand why that might be the case and adjust plans accordingly.

Emerging mobility options also enable new service designs that allow agencies to target underserved constituent groups rather than geographic areas. The Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority (PSTA) in Pinellas County, Florida, has piloted "Late Shift", a novel late-night on-demand service option to serve low-income, third-shift workers in the region⁸⁷. Under contract with Uber and local provider United Taxi, as part of a one-year pilot PSTA completely subsidized e-hail and taxi work trips for workers with a monthly bus pass from 10pm to 6am, during which time the agency's transit service is not a viable commuting option⁸⁷. The service provided approximately 4,000 rides monthly as of late 2017, significant for a region that has provided 17,000 paratransit rides monthly over the past five years⁸⁸.

VIII. Preserving & improving housing affordability

Public transportation practitioners can help improve transportation access but that comprises only one part of the access to opportunity equation—housing being another. While local, regional, and sometimes state governments exert stronger influence on housing and land use policies, transit agencies still have an important role to play to advance affordability, both as advocates and as planning and development organizations. All the high-quality transit in the world does not benefit people who cannot afford to live and work near it, so agencies must take community concerns regarding gentrification and displacement seriously.

Housing and transportation costs can together constitute more than half of household budgets⁹⁰. Because housing costs and transportation access are interrelated, policy-makers need to coordinate policies to ensure that affordability is measured in terms of total housing and transportation costs to the extent possible, and that affordable housing is available to those who rely on public transportation:

There is a tension between the potential benefits new investments bring and those investments' potential adverse consequences, which should be navigated with input from the communities in which those investments are being considered. Transit agencies can mitigate gentrification and displacement impacts using a variety of tools, including by planning service that accounts for and/or is less likely to drive displacement, by funding and promoting transit-oriented development and local land trusts, and by coordinating with the local and regional agency partners who oversee land-use and housing policies and regulations.

PLANNING TO PREVENT AND MITIGATE DISPLACEMENT

Public agencies who are committed to preventing and mitigating gentrification and displacement impacts start by conducting analysis to understand what communities face the greatest risk of these impacts, and in which ways. Regional variation in housing markets, population trends, congestion and transportation access, employment distribution, and building stock influences what specific issues need to be addressed^{91/92}.

Several agencies have implemented relevant policy and process reforms geared toward improving affordable housing availability near transit. For example, the Center for TOD and the Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) have generated neighborhood profiles based on regionally-specific people- and place-types, which are aligned with appropriate policy regimes in PSRC’s “Growing Transit Communities” strategy. These profiles account for population demographics, neighborhoods’ transit-orientation (density, existence of mixed-uses, walkability, quality of transit service), and an assessment of potential demand for residential TOD (employment patterns, household incomes and sizes, and housing costs). In the Bay Area, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) commissioned researchers at UC Berkeley to develop the “Regional Early Warning System for Displacement⁹⁴.”

Transportation mode can also influence a transit project’s likelihood of enabling or accelerating displacement. This is particularly relevant to rail investments, which have been shown to drive substantial real estate value increases particularly in dense, in-demand neighborhoods. Few local housing, planning, or transportation agencies have planning tools that adequately assess the displacement risks of real estate or transportation investments, but those agencies could partner with community organizations, researchers, or other experts to develop them, following the example of the Urban Displacement Project, for example⁹⁵.

Rather than evaluating investments based on transit capacity needs or cost-efficiency, transit decision-makers and elected officials in the U.S. tend to be biased toward rail investment, which can increase gentrification and displacement pressures in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. Rail investments that run through communities of color and/or low-income communities without stopping, on the other hand, exacerbate existing disparities by imposing the burdens of construction and operational noise without the potential transportation access improvements—bypassing likely transit riders in the process.

UPDATING PARKING AND ZONING POLICY TO IMPROVE HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

Local governments have a variety of transportation policy tools at their disposal that both strengthen public transportation and improve housing affordability, particularly policies that unbundle housing and parking costs by eliminating parking minimum requirements or providing incentives to reduce parking construction via zoning rules in transit-rich areas⁹⁶. Parking minimums for new housing and real estate developments are also non-optional rent increases for future tenants. Transit agencies may wield some influence about these policy issues but generally do not control them, so this paper will not explore parking and zoning in depth.

TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT

One of the most direct means of connecting low-income people to high-quality transit is to build affordable housing on top of it through transit-oriented development. Agencies can account for affordable housing development in their station planning efforts, engage municipalities to up-zone in existing or planned transit-priority areas, establish policy to require affordable housing in TOD, and play a direct role in developing affordable housing in TODs via land acquisition, creating dedicated affordable housing funds, or joint development.⁹⁷ Increasing the concentration of affordable housing in TODs is also likely to yield greater and more sustainable ridership benefits to transit agencies^{98/99}.

Inclusionary zoning can create incentives for affordable housing construction, as in Massachusetts' smart growth zoning legislation, MA 40R—which has provided incentive payments in special zoning districts allowing for the planned construction of nearly 14,000 new housing units and with over 3,000 building permits issued, 20 percent of which must be affordable¹⁰⁰. Inclusionary zoning can backfire, however, if its incentives (or mandates) cause housing prices to increase by depressing overall housing construction.

TODs can also drive displacement, so transit agencies must take care to avoid exacerbating affordability issues from the outset of the planning process. Dallas Area Rapid Transit mitigates the potentially displacement-inducing impacts of its tax increment finance funding by allocating 20 percent of that funding to affordable housing development¹⁰¹. In Denver, Enterprise's Denver Regional TOD Fund has spurred the community-driven creation or preservation of more than a thousand affordable housing units near new light rail stations developed through Denver RTD's FasTracks initiative¹⁰², and similar TOD land acquisition funds exist in Charlotte and San Francisco¹⁰³. Bay Area Rapid Transit requires a minimum of 20 percent affordable housing units in station TODs and has set a more ambitious target of 35 percent¹⁰⁴.

Transit agencies can also advocate directly for improved housing affordability, for example by pursuing (or requiring) affordable housing construction through joint development agreements. DC's Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority requires affordable housing development on land it controls, for example requiring 20 percent affordable housing units on all seven parcels surrounding the Columbia Heights metro station¹⁰⁵. Metro Los Angeles' joint development program "seeks to facilitate construction of affordable housing units, such that 35% of the total housing units in the Metro joint development portfolio are affordable for residents earning 60% or less of the Area Median Income (AMI)".¹⁰⁶

Policies intended to improve equity must be developed with input and engagement from people in the communities they affect. This can happen as part of agency-led or agency-facilitated development process, but it can also be led by the community directly via land trusts like those who have joined forces to create the Greater Boston Community Land Trust Network. This coalition of community-based organizations has joined forces to invest in affordable housing preservation and development throughout the Boston region, building on the past successes of members like the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative.



IX. Supporting & creating high-quality employment

In addition to conveying people to jobs, public transportation provides employment opportunities. Transit agencies have a strong legacy of providing employment in low-income and communities of color. The Amalgamated Transit Union and King County Metro's PACE initiative is a partnership between workforce and transit agency designed to improve working conditions at the agency with equity squarely in mind.

Transit development can also threaten others' livelihoods if care is not taken to mitigate adverse impacts on small businesses adjacent to major capital construction projects. Lessons from Minneapolis-St. Paul, San Francisco, and elsewhere provide guidance on reducing potential adverse impacts of transit construction, particularly for rail projects.



Construction during the Green Line project, Minneapolis, MN

DIRECT JOB CREATION

Transit generates ongoing employment for operations and maintenance staff, as well as short-to-medium term employment for capital construction projects. Transit agencies often commit to hire local employees and have goals for directly employing people of color, as well as for hiring minority- and women-owned enterprises. To strengthen local job creation initiatives, some agencies allocate a percentage of project budgets to workforce development and training programs. The Transportation Equity Network promotes the “Green Construction Careers Model”, which leverages a federal law allowing State DOTs to use 0.5 percent of surface transportation funds to support workforce development programs.^{108/109}

Transit agencies often take pride in not just creating jobs but creating high-quality jobs. King County Metro’s Partnership to Achieve Comprehensive Equity (PACE) initiative is a partnership between King County Metro and the local Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) “committed to developing the policies, processes, and tools necessary to support a work culture of inclusion, fairness and comprehensive equity for all within the agency”.¹¹⁰ Since PACE’s 2013 launch—in response to an open letter written by the ATU Local 587—ATU and King County Metro have worked together to develop shared strategic goals and a detailed list of recommended actions to improve internal workforce equity, hire a Diversity and Inclusion Manager, created new internal mentorship opportunities, added required anti-bias training for agency interview panels, amended the employee engagement survey, and developed numerous other internal staff resources.¹¹¹

MITIGATING CONSTRUCTION IMPACTS

Small businesses are more likely than large ones to be owned by people of color or immigrants, and can be susceptible to lost revenues during large, long-term construction projects like light rail developments. Metro Transit’s effective approach to mitigating business impacts during Green Line construction are described above, and were implemented in response to a lawsuit from NAACP’s St. Paul chapter¹¹². SFMTA has a construction mitigation plan in partnership with the Office of Economic Workforce Development, and offers technical assistance, marketing support, and grants to impacted businesses, starting with the Central Subway Project Construction Mitigation Program¹¹³. Transit agencies in Portland, OR, Phoenix, and Seattle are among others who have recently implemented mitigation programs, which generally fall into five categories: loan and grant programs, communications, signage, contractor involvement, and business counseling/marketing.¹¹⁴



X. Making streets & vehicles safer spaces

Transit offers public health and safety improvements, but also creates some challenges. Vision Zero policies, designed to eliminate traffic fatalities, make street safety a high priority in cities around the U.S. Transit typically improves street safety, but transit projects also offer the opportunity to implement bike and pedestrian improvements in parallel. Transit vehicles can also be high-polluting, creating a need to monitor pollution and target emission-reduction improvements, particularly in areas with a high risk for asthma and other respiratory diseases.

The need to ensure safety for transit passengers creates a tension between the comfort some passengers derive from a law-enforcement presence and the fear that law-enforcement officers create for others. As a result, SFMTA has updated its fare enforcement policies to remove police officers from routine fare enforcement. Applying a complementary approach, TriMet updated its fare penalty structure to minimize interactions with law enforcement and the court system, provide community service alternatives to expensive fines, and enroll eligible people in the agency's new low-income fare program.



PUBLIC HEALTH

There are a variety of opportunities to design transit investments to achieve public health and clean environment benefits for communities that have been burdened by environmental injustice. The City of Portland uses transit investments as an opportunity to add green infrastructure and address water management needs¹¹⁵. In New York City, the Department of Transportation coordinates street-level transit investments, like the recently launched Q52/Q53 Select Bus Service route on Woodhaven Blvd, with Vision Zero goals to improve pedestrian and bike safety.¹¹⁶ Low- or zero-emission vehicle purchases can also reduce local pollution, which can be particularly important along corridors with high asthma incidence. For example, King County Metro uses asthma incidence and demographic data to prioritize zero-emission fleet deployment to improve air quality in corridors of the highest need¹¹⁷. Advocates in Atlanta have also identified the importance of prioritizing investments in safe walking access to transit—not just the provision of transit itself.¹¹⁸

POLICING

Transit riders deserve to be treated with respect, and transit systems' health depends on the quality of riders' experience. Police or other security officials are often present as part of the transit riding experience, both to respond to minor incidents or emergencies, and in some cases to validate fares or patrol stations. These officials' presence is often intended to increase feelings of safety, but it can have the opposite effect if done in an insensitive way. Combined with recent and long-standing histories of racially biased policing, this can create anxiety, particularly among people of color. Equity-oriented agencies have taken steps to adjust fare enforcement and transportation-related policing efforts to minimize anxiety and conflict, and to transparently report data on their fare enforcement practice, segmented by race and income.

The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Authority (SFMTA) has worked to make its transit service more welcoming, even after making it possible to board through all doors on buses citywide—a change that requires the presence of fare enforcement officers. The SFMTA has, however, discontinued prior practice of fare inspection “stings” that caused ‘confusion and fear’ among riders, implemented training programs to foster cultural competency, increased second-language proficiency among fare inspectors¹¹⁹, and de-criminalized youth fare evasion.¹²⁰

Advocates like Pittsburghers for Public Transit¹²¹ and New York's Community Service Society¹²² have argued for decriminalized fare enforcement to keep riders out of the criminal justice system, where bail requirements and potential immigration consequences await. A Cleveland judge also ruled that the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (RTA) could no longer use police-based enforcement, affirming the equity benefits of civilian proof-of-payment enforcement—in this case, the RTA's HealthLine bus rapid transit system¹²³. RTA's unfortunate reaction has been to adopt a slower boarding procedure for the route, significantly increasing travel time and reducing ridership.

Portland's TriMet has implemented a tiered fare enforcement regime designed to enroll first-time offenders in the agency's forthcoming low-income fare program (if eligible). People who are fined for not paying the fare will also have the option of performing community service in lieu of paying the agency's relatively high fines¹²⁴. This approach acknowledges that many people who do not pay fares simply do not have the means to do so, and that unpaid fines and/or arrests can impact peoples' lives well beyond transit, for example reducing their ability to find employment or qualify for loans.



Proof of payment fare enforcement on Sound Transit, Seattle, WA

XII. Transit Equity Opportunities

Too many transportation leaders have embraced a compliance-oriented approach to racial equity and social justice, falsely equating equity practice with “Title VI” analysis. Compliance is not enough following decades of red-lining and disinvestment in inner-city neighborhoods of color, which specifically targeted African-American communities, preventing many from building generational wealth through home ownership; not enough after highways have been disproportionately built through predominately low-income communities of color, reinforcing spatial segregation across the U.S. and creating disproportionate health disparities in surrounding neighborhoods; and not enough in light of wealthy residents’ recent migration spurred by urban revitalization policies, intentionally designed and implemented to attract the “Creative Class” into city centers with displacement and the suburbanization of poverty defining a new generation of demographic change in the largest U.S. cities.

Advancing opportunity for low-income people and people of color by improving transit access requires hard work but has the potential to yield both societal and strategic benefits.

Public transportation practitioners can make today’s “above and beyond” into tomorrow’s inclusive business-as-usual by implementing these principles thoughtfully in the context of their own communities. Local political leaders and agency staff might start by looking to local community-based organizations and advocates for guidance on key priorities to advance equity in the ways that matter in their cities. Strong relationships between agencies with different missions and jurisdictions as well as between agencies and advocates foster shared accountability and helps avoid leaving transit riders stranded.



Bus stop in Southeastern Los Angeles



Transit systems that are designed to work for a city or region’s most vulnerable populations will work for everyone. By establishing more inclusive planning practices transit agencies can build trust with the communities they serve. In turn, transit riders who feel respected by their transit system will be more inclined to keep using it. In other words, equity is not merely the right thing to do—it is also good for business, and a strategic imperative.

Transit riders, and especially those who are transit-dependent, are a constituent group whose voice is typically unheard in today’s political system—so their voices need to be sought out, listened to, and amplified. There is enormous potential for civic and government initiatives to improve local bus service, foster transit-supportive conditions like walkability and affordable, mixed-use development, and cultivate improved community access to essential opportunities like healthcare, food, education, and jobs—especially for the people who need those improvements most. The ability to realize this potential will depend on the depth of agencies’ commitments to funding, identifying, and prioritizing the investments that matter most to their unique communities.

Riders organizing for better transit in New Orleans, LA



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