

TransitCenter's 2020-2025

Strategic Plan



TransitCenter

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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TransitCenter works to improve public transit in ways that make cities more just, sustainable, and prosperous.

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1. The World We Envision in 2025

Five years from now, major U.S. cities will have more abundant and useful public transit. With fast, frequent, reliable service within reach for more people, ridership will consistently rise in major urban regions throughout the country.

Better transit service will tangibly improve life in U.S. cities by increasing access to jobs, education, and economic opportunity; reducing household transportation costs; producing cleaner air and better public health; lowering greenhouse gas emissions; and intensifying economic activity. These benefits will accrue especially to people whose mobility, economic status, and wellbeing have historically been hampered by race, class, and gender biases.

To bring about this future, the staff of TransitCenter will pursue a three-pronged strategy that we call the three A's.



AGENDA:

Elected officials, journalists, and others who influence transit policy will have a deeper understanding of why transit matters and what makes transit useful to people. Officials responsible for transit will understand that transit succeeds when policy is grounded in the needs of current riders while seeking to provide more access and mobility to more people. Opinion leaders will think of transit as an essential urban service, not a niche or optional amenity. Officials at all levels will reform the hidden structural biases toward roads and automobiles that pervade the U.S. transportation planning and finance system. They will set high expectations, commit funding, and perform oversight in ways that reflect transit's foundational importance to cities and city residents.

ADVOCACY:

Civic champions for transit in major U.S. cities will be more knowledgeable, more diverse, more numerous, and more effective. Groups that advocate for transit will have a deeper understanding of what practices, public investments, and policies make transit more useful to more people. Broad coalitions in major metro regions will support policies that improve transit. Tapping into TransitCenter's research and expertise, they will work to make service better for current riders and enact policies that grow ridership by expanding access to good transit service.

AGENCIES:

U.S. metropolitan regions will be served by a more ambitious and representative transit industry. The people who work in transit agencies and related governments, such as municipal departments of public works or transportation, will have a sense of mission and public interest. Leaders at transit agencies will commit to ambitious operational upgrades that improve the experience of transit riders, and will set goals for ridership growth. They will transparently measure performance and progress. They will deploy resources cost-effectively with an eye toward gaining support for greater public investment. A talented workforce will put the needs of riders first. Governing boards and other decision-makers, representative of who rides transit, will prioritize steps that expand mobility and access for riders. Other local, regional, and state agencies will adopt policies like transit-priority street design and transit-supportive zoning that create conditions conducive to good service and abundant access.

2. Situational Analysis

Good transportation systems enable people to lead full lives. They provide access to the people and places we go to on a daily basis – work, school, stores, doctors’ offices, family, friends – without posing undue burdens or barriers. In urban settings, fixed-route transit is essential to good transportation due to its low cost and spatial efficiency.

The promise of abundant, affordable transit is that it can make access to daily destinations available to all, with no barriers linked to race, income, age, or ability. The benefits of excellent transit also extend beyond transportation, enabling economic prosperity to be broadly shared, preventing loss of life caused by traffic collisions and pollution, and reducing emissions that threaten the global climate.

In U.S. urban transportation systems today, good transit is scarce, not abundant. Even in large cities, highways, automobile parking, and private cars dominate transportation systems to the exclusion of transit. That bias limits access and exacerbates inequality, traffic deaths, chronic disease, and greenhouse gas emissions. The modern American transportation system is replete with undue burdens and barriers, especially for people of color, people with low incomes, the young and the old.

To make progress, we must generate the sustained political energy and practical knowhow to enact policies that will re-orient transportation systems around transit instead of the private car.

Institutional & Political Context

The current U.S. policy regime is weighted heavily against transit. Most federal and state government transportation policies and funding formulas are relics of the 1950s, and contain large explicit and implicit subsidies to driving.

Transit agencies, meanwhile, generally have a narrowly-defined service delivery function. Most lack control over policies like land use or street design that are major determinants of transit ridership and the quality of service. The local governments that do control those policies generally make decisions without regard to the consequences for transportation.

Elected officials seldom exercise the will to implement policies that benefit transit, and their comprehension of how to effectively improve transit service tends to be shallow. Few ride transit themselves. Too many are easily swayed by media coverage that tilts in favor of car-centric policy or non-solutions with a sleek veneer of new technology, like autonomous vehicles. Even officials that profess to support transit often get sidetracked by projects like mixed-traffic streetcars or longer-distance lines to low-density suburbs that provide little value to many transit riders, neglecting the operation of existing transit services that many more people rely on.

As a political constituency, transit riders in most U.S. cities face an uphill fight. They are outnumbered by people who do not ride transit and confronted by systemic power imbalances, often along lines of race and class reinforced by jurisdictional lines, that are pervasive in American civic life.









State of the Transit Industry

While there are many energetic, knowledgeable people working at U.S. transit agencies, the stated objectives and overall culture of transit providers lack ambition. By and large, they are not oriented around an ethos of continual service improvement.

Few major transit agencies in the U.S. currently have funded plans to dramatically scale up service and grow ridership. Their goals are modest, even compared to peer cities in neighboring Canada. Many are struggling just to adhere to current schedules.

Few agencies assess their performance against meaningful benchmarks, or even a definition of successful day-to-day operations. Measures of service quality vary system by system, and are tracked and reported inconsistently.

One reason that goals are hazy and performance is uneven is that transit agency oversight is structurally weak. The opaque governance structures that ultimately set transit agency budgets and policy are typically unrepresentative of transit riders and unresponsive to their needs.

Some transit agencies and DOTs lack the internal staff capacity to effectively manage projects, carry out politically challenging improvements, or communicate the value of their own services. Agency leaders in many cases have been following an old playbook for decades, fostering a culture of risk aversion to institutional change. Political expedience all too often drives agency policy and staff, offering few incentives to experiment or address long-standing problems.

Management-labor relations tend to be rigid. Lack of productive dialogue between agencies and transit unions in the U.S. often prevents operational reforms, even when those reforms would not reduce wages. At the same time, many frontline transit staff work under dreary conditions. Public agencies often are prevented from rewarding high-performing staff or disciplining poor performers. Outdated and inefficient practices embedded in human resources, procurement, and other key functions make it difficult for agencies to evolve.

The industry's costs are generally rising faster than inflation and revenue. U.S. transit construction costs are the highest in the world, which makes it hard to justify and build expansion projects.

Finally, the ultimate indicator: ridership. In 2007, Americans took 9.2 billion transit trips. Ridership has fluctuated for the past decade, and in 2017 transit ridership again stood at 9.2 billion trips, despite growth in population and economic output.

These national statistics obscure extreme variation. Over the past decade, ridership increased at a few agencies, while declining precipitously at others. Certain patterns illuminate the differences: the agencies growing ridership are invariably the ones that have added service and redrawn their networks to improve performance and access. In short, agencies and local governments that pay attention to transit riders' needs attract more riders, while those that let their systems languish see ridership decline.

Transit agency governance, leadership, and practice are ripe for reform. A new focus across the industry on improving the service riders rely on today, and putting more service in the places where people use it the most, is overdue.

State of Transit Advocacy and the Civic Sector

TransitCenter's research into how to achieve transit improvement points to the importance of independent, community-based advocacy. However, local transit advocacy is highly uneven in its composition and effectiveness.

Organizations that advocate for transit riders are generally poorly resourced and have limited capacity. In most U.S. cities, transit riders are a small fraction of the population. Even where transit usage is relatively high, transit riders themselves are usually not influential enough to wield significant political power without aligning with other interests. And unlike other types of organizations that share a mission and goals, transit advocates have no peer-to-peer network in different cities to learn from each other.

Many seemingly natural allies who might be inclined to support transit—such as service-worker unions, environmental groups, or business associations—do not advocate for transit or have an accurate conception of what makes transit useful to people. Many philanthropic foundations do not yet recognize how transit advocacy fits objectives such as public health, economic justice, or preventing climate change. Environmental organizations mistakenly think the primary issue related to transportation is electrification or fuel type, rather than the more important goals of increased transit ridership and reduced car dependence.

Advocacy also suffers from the absence of a common, research-based policy agenda. High-quality transit research is regularly produced by U.S. planning and engineering schools, the federally funded university transportation research centers, and the Transportation Research Board. There are two key gaps: synthesis of transit research to inform big-picture policymaking, and dissemination and translation of research for practitioners and the broader public.

As a result, elected officials, policymakers, the media, and many members of the public have narrow ideas about transit's goals. Transit in many U.S. regions is often viewed as a transportation service of last resort, only for the unfortunate poor, so they think its quality doesn't matter, politically or otherwise. Conversely, some local officials see transit as a catalyst for real estate development in specific parts of town, or as an attraction for tourists or sought-after "millennials." These officials often fail to view transit in a practical way, as a means of connecting lots of real people with everything they need to lead their lives in a vibrant city.

No organization has articulated a new national vision for transit that can inspire policy change at the local, state, and federal levels, and few have articulated a forward-looking vision to modernize or transform transportation bureaucracies.

The field of transit advocacy needs significant financial and intellectual resources, as well as a means of learning and acting together. Because transit riders themselves are not a large segment of the population in most U.S. metropolitan regions, and tend not to have ample resources, coalitions with other groups are essential to elevating transit as a political priority.





3. Our Values & Theory of Change

TransitCenter aims to shape transit policy and practice to grow ridership and make cities more just and environmentally sustainable. We do so consistent with four values.

Strategic: Our decisions are guided by how to most effectively advance the mission. We approach our work carefully and conscientiously.

Public-spirited: Our work is grounded in the interests of transit riders and the broader public.

Equitable: To rectify longstanding injustices and achieve greater social equity, we work to improve transit in ways that address the mobility needs of people of color, women, people with low incomes, and people with disabilities, and to reform the power structures that have excluded them.

Pragmatic: Our research is methodical and applicable to transit decisions in the real world. Our engagement with transit professionals consistently improves the state of agency practice. Our advocacy produces tangible transit improvements that make a difference in people's lives.

We believe that deep, broad transit improvement will be achieved through an interdependent strategy -- the “three A’s”:

- 1. AGENDA: Establish and amplify an evidence-based, ridership-centered agenda to shape transit policy and practice**
 - a) Conduct research that identifies practical steps to achieving better transit
 - b) Spark conversation and critical thinking about key issues facing the industry
 - c) Challenge accepted but counterproductive paradigms
 - d) Celebrate and elevate successful reform efforts by advocates, agencies, and city leaders
 - e) Broadcast TransitCenter’s work and point of view through a variety of compelling creative media, from publications to events to social media to press placements
- 2. ADVOCACY: Strengthen and grow effective civic advocacy for better transit**
 - a) Fund transit advocacy, both on behalf of specific service improvements and systemic policy change
 - b) Build capacity through aiding the development of effective approaches for advocacy with strategic and technical support and by connecting advocates with each other
 - c) Enlist new allies who will broaden advocacy for better transit.
 - d) Connect advocates around the country, and support the development of stronger ties between local advocates and agency staff
 - e) Advocate ourselves – in NYC, our home and the largest transit market in the country, we engage directly in campaigns for transit reform.
- 3. AGENCIES: Spur and support meaningful and measurable improvements to agency practice**
 - a) Inspire agency staff and leadership to adopt approaches that will realize higher goals, standards and improved methods of providing service
 - b) Critique and serve as a watchdog
 - c) Elevate best practices for others to emulate
 - d) Remove obstacles to policy reform, whether embedded in federal regulations, outmoded governance structures, or systems like human resource or procurement rules.
 - e) Connect agency staff to peers with whom they can exchange successful approaches, and to local advocates who are allies in advancing reforms.

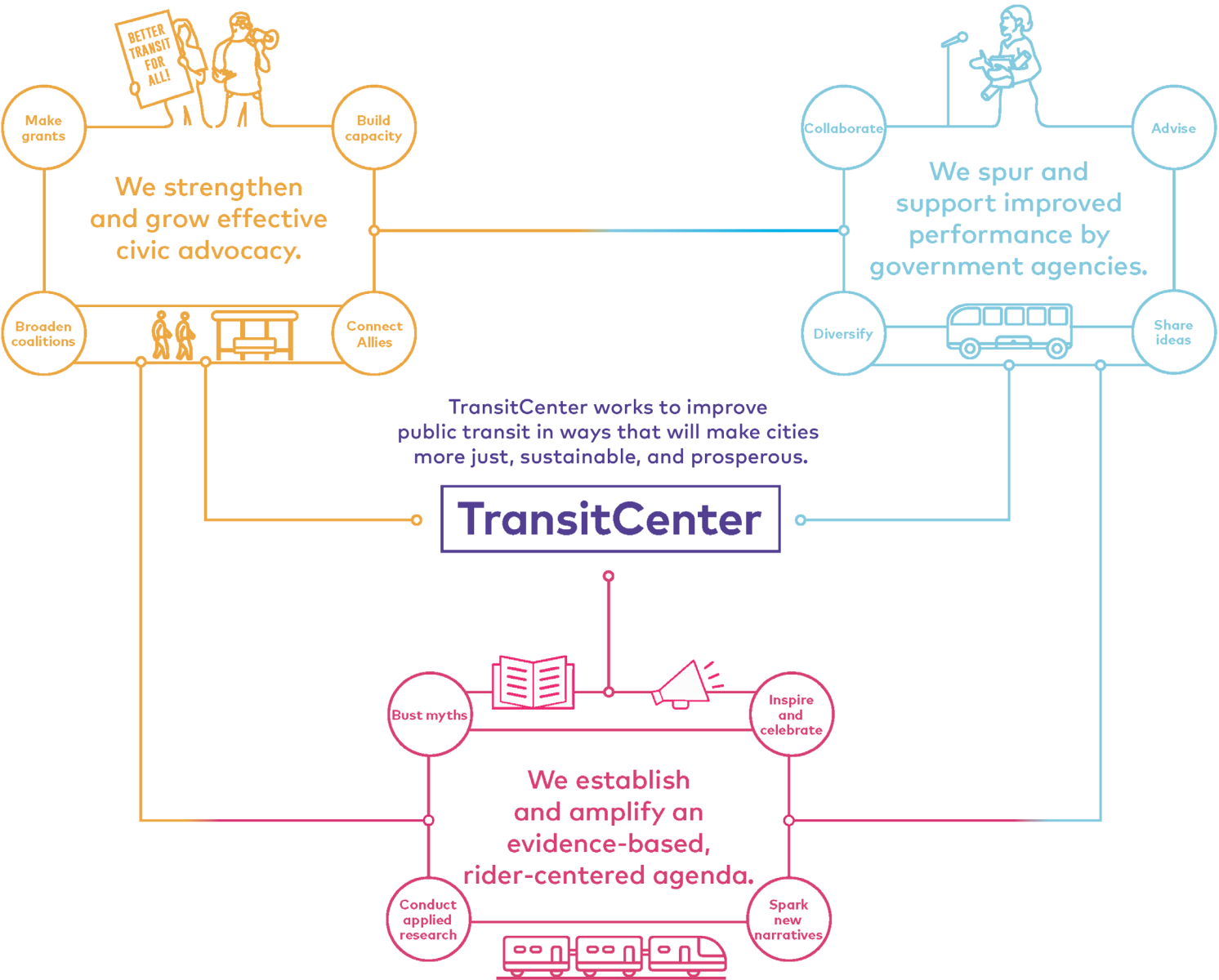
4. How TransitCenter works

Transit in the U.S. underperforms for two related reasons. First, elected officials rarely make transit and transit riders a political priority. And second, most transportation agencies are not equipped to consistently plan and operate high-quality transit that is useful to many people.

TransitCenter's work addresses both deficiencies. We advance public interest advocacy for better transit in the political realm, and we improve the performance of the government agencies that should deliver better transit.

Based on that framework, TransitCenter organizes our staff around four thematic program areas or "teams." The advocacy team and the agency practice team carry out our objectives by engaging directly in the arenas of politics and the transit industry. Support for both is provided by the research team, whose rigorous analysis builds a knowledge base that the entire TransitCenter staff draws from, and the communications team, which amplifies the work of other TransitCenter staff and ensures that it reaches the audiences necessary to maximize policy impact.

A more detailed description of the functions and strategic vision of each team follows.





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BUS REPORT



Advocacy

TransitCenter conducts and supports advocacy to realize an ambitious, rider-focused vision for transit in major metro regions across the U.S. Improving public transit in America is a political undertaking and TransitCenter works to reform who has power over transit decisions and how decisions are made. Through advocacy, we establish the need for change and apply pressure on officials who are in a position to shift city and transit agency policy. Our focus is guided by our research on what riders want from transit and on the policies required to create just, sustainable, and prosperous cities.

Campaigns we have supported or led, like Bus Turnaround in New York City and Better Buses in Boston, successfully marshal public pressure to win service improvements in the form of network improvements, transit-priority plans, street redesigns and other policy changes.

Success will often require persuading non-riders and their elected representatives that transit is important to a broad cross-section of the public. Broad coalitions consisting of business, labor, environmental, social justice, and sustainable transportation advocates can be brought together to win better transit. Such coalitions are currently the exception, not the rule.

We also see an opportunity to build more powerful advocacy for transit by deepening our ties with advocates for environmental justice, affordable housing, and a range of organizations who represent transit riders but are focused on other issues. These groups are often absent from transit advocacy despite a strong potential alignment with their missions. TransitCenter is well positioned to play a leadership role in growing and strengthening advocacy for transit nationally given our ability to develop, support, and bring together multi-sector partners.

Agency Practice

TransitCenter has worked closely with industry practitioners to understand the challenges and obstacles facing the people who work at transit agencies, and what's holding agencies back from addressing those challenges. We've heard that organizational culture and institutional barriers – such as habitual aversion to risk, failure to embrace new ideas, and outdated human resource practices – discourage change. However, many people working in transit agencies express a desire to turn things around, and improve management, operations, and planning. They recognize the need for new leadership willing to embrace new ideas and approaches.

TransitCenter can help meet that desire. Our independence as a public interest foundation with no commercial product to sell uniquely positions us to lift up the innovative practices that make for better transit. TransitCenter has identified three areas of agency practice in need of systemic change: Governance, Workforce and Talent, and Delivering Operations. Fixing some of the chronic issues in these three gateway areas will lead to cascading benefits across the industry.

We work through agenda-setting research geared for practitioners, best practice synthesis for the industry (which can be done via publications or in-person briefings, convenings, or workshops), and grantmaking. Additionally, at times we work one-on-one with agencies or cities, helping them to work through changes in practice. Our role will be to inspire and assist, ensuring that riders are at the center of all decision-making. We aim to be the resource agencies turn to for progressive and inclusive practices, both culturally and operationally, that will improve transit service, grow ridership, and create more just and sustainable cities.





Research

TransitCenter creates original research and works to link existing research to a change agenda, in order to equip advocates and practitioners and make an impact across geographies.

Our research is rider-focused, as opposed to being driven by transit industry interests. It seeks to illuminate why people make transportation decisions, and how transit can maximize benefit to the public. One notable effect of our public-oriented approach is that our research often challenges and upends received wisdom within the transit industry and among journalists, elected officials, and civic leaders.

We aim to produce work that is both accessible to decisionmakers and applicable by practitioners. Our research products draw clear, high-level conclusions that help elected officials, journalists, and decisionmakers understand transit, while including enough detail to be useful for agency staff and transit advocates to pick up and use.

In seeking to deliver better transit service for riders, our research acknowledges the role of politics and human capital. We emphasize institutional factors, governance, and advocacy best practices as well as the nuts and bolts of transit policy. And by transparently sharing our methodology and generating information in an open framework, we encourage others to adapt and expand on our work.

Communications

TransitCenter's communications program shapes and broadcasts messages from the research, agency practice, and advocacy programs, with an eye toward maximizing policy impact. While TransitCenter seeks change in major cities all over the nation, our staff cannot be everywhere. The communications program both extends our influence to geographic areas where we do not have a direct presence, and amplifies our voice in areas where we do.

Collaborating with the other program areas, the communications team seeks to produce consistently high-quality reports, videos, and other communications products. Our communications advance policy reform by directly influencing policy makers and transit agency staff, and by shaping public opinion writ large via the press and broad-based platforms like social media.

How the Teams Work Together

TransitCenter’s dual focus on advocacy and agency practice positions us to successfully deploy an “inside-outside” approach to policy change. The advocacy team may work with a community-based organization pressuring a transit agency to adopt a policy reform, for instance, while the agency practice team works with receptive board members and staff, who need technical advice on how to implement.

The research team both shapes the future agenda of other program areas and supports them in real time. An example in the first category includes developing an assessment of the socio-economic justice of transit systems (now in progress), which should be of interest to both advocates and agencies. An example in the second category is the rigorous, replicable analysis used for bus route report cards, a tool that advocates in increasing numbers of cities are asking for.

The communications team simultaneously broadcasts our work to all of our audiences, and provides support in refining work produced by other teams. Examples in the first category include press outreach for advocacy actions and the steady stream of blog posts and social media output that distribute the findings of other teams. Examples in the second category include the communications staff’s advice on effective high-level messaging in the scoping stage of a proposed report, or the adaptation of the report into a compelling video.

In addition to the four programmatic teams, an operations team creates the conditions that make our work possible, by providing us the financial solvency, office environment, human resources capacity building, and other elements essential to a successful organization.

Geographic Priorities

TransitCenter deploys our resources to provoke action in major metropolitan regions across the country. We devote our staff time and grant dollars to the places with the greatest potential to achieve our goals of increasing equitable access, improving environmental quality, and generating shared prosperity. Receptive and ambitious partners rooted in the regions we work in are indispensable to success.

To serve the interests of transit riders, we must be active where the most transit riders are. Improving transit performance in big regions can make the largest impact, because transit service is inadequate — and inequitably distributed — even in the places most conducive to transit as a primary mode of transportation. While the potential for growth is huge, few of the top twenty regions in the country are currently on a course to significantly increase ridership. This underperformance in the places where transit should naturally excel suggests that focusing on the highest-ridership regions in the country offers the highest possible return on TransitCenter’s investment.

Stewardship of TransitCenter’s resources requires choosing additional geographic priorities based on more subjective assessments. We also assess where to allocate attention and funds based on the presence of potential collaborators in advocacy organizations, government agencies, and elected leadership; specific timely opportunities for policy change; or demonstration projects that will serve as examples beyond the initial region.









Measuring Our Impact

Seeking to maximize the impact of our activities and expenditures, we will measure our performance and social impact. We will also assist metropolitan regions in doing so by developing new measurement tools.

We will evaluate our programs and initiatives based on outcomes that indicate progress toward improved transit service and transit governance in major U.S. metro regions. Examples of measurable outcomes include the implementation of policies and reforms like transit-only lanes and network redesigns, and changes in governance and practice that make agencies more representative and accountable to the public. We will report on these program metrics and accomplishments annually.

More broadly, we will create and disseminate tools to measure the social impact of transit in ways that are currently overlooked by the conventional tools of the trade. With our partners, we are currently developing a method to assess the social equity of transit systems, and how distinct transportation policy choices make transit systems more or less equitable. This metric will be useful to agencies and advocates striving to make U.S. transportation systems more just. We are also developing tools that link transit investment and operations to improved environmental outcomes, specifically using reduced automobile vehicle miles traveled (VMT) as a proxy for greater sustainability.

These impact measurement tools will keep our work focused on initiatives with the greatest potential to achieve our goal of growing ridership in ways that foster more just, sustainable, and prosperous cities.

