

TransitCenter

Who Rules Transit?

**An Analysis of Who Holds Power in Transit Agency
Decision Making and How It Should Change**



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TransitCenter works to improve public transit in ways that make cities more just, environmentally sustainable, and economically vibrant. We believe that 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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Page 4: Walt Mancini **Page 5:** Amir Abdul-Shakur **Page 6:** Los Angeles Metro **Page 7:** Regional Transportation District, Denver, Colorado **Page 12:** MBTA, Better Bus Project **Page 14:** Transit Alliance Miami **Page 16:** Metro Transit, Minneapolis, Minnesota **Page 21:** Anne Wernikoff **Page 24:** Public Outreach discussion prompt used by Transit Alliance Miami **Page 25:** New York City Department of Transportation

Design

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Introduction

Every day public transit agencies make decisions that affect the health, economic status, and social well-being of transit riders and local communities. Decisions like where to site a bus stop, how to change a service schedule, how much to charge for a trip, or which stations should receive capital improvements affect people's access to jobs, education, medical care, and other necessities. And in places where transit provides abundant access to these destinations, household transportation costs are more affordable, economic mobility is higher, and harmful automotive emissions are lower.

Too often, these important decisions are entrusted to transit agency leadership and staff who do not reflect the diversity of riders and communities most affected.

In the public transit workforce, 66% of managerial and leadership positions are held by white people, despite accounting for only 40% of transit riders, while people of color are underrepresented in every area of the industry despite making up a majority of transit riders¹. Black, Latinx, and Asian-American workers account for almost half

1 <https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/Resources/resources/reportsandpublications/Documents/AP-TA-Who-Rides-Public-Transportation-2017.pdf>

While race and ethnicity are not the only determinants of someone’s personal experiences and levels of access and opportunity, there is a fundamental mismatch between who is making key transit decisions at public transit agencies, and who is most affected by those decisions.



of the total transit workforce—45%—but only 33.8% of managerial and leadership positions. Specifically, Black transit workers make up a quarter of the entire transit workforce and 27% of frontline workers, but less than 20% of managerial positions. Frontline workers, who are demographically more reflective of riders², have particular expertise about day-to-day operations and regularly interact with the public, yet are typically not included in decision-making.

While race and ethnicity are not the only determinants of someone’s personal experiences and levels of access and opportunity, there is a fundamental mismatch between who is making key transit decisions at public transit agencies, and who is most affected by those decisions.

What’s more, many transit agencies struggle to engage riders in public outreach. In addition to a history of mistrust between marginalized communities and government agencies, public outreach processes often don’t consider barriers such as work schedules outside 9-to-5 hours, or child- and home-care responsibilities.

The lack of inclusivity during the public outreach process and the lack of diversity among transit agency decision-makers has contributed to exclusionary systems and disparate outcomes that disproportionately burden lower-income groups and communities of color. To create better transit systems and achieve equitable outcomes, public transit agencies need more representative leadership, more inclusive internal decision-making processes, and more meaningful public engagement practices, where the people most affected can influence policy.

² <https://transitcenter.org/protecting-transit-workers-racial-justice/>

This report examines the state of diversity in agencies, with a focus on board leadership, and illuminates how internal and external agency efforts to implement more inclusive decision-making processes can lead to better transportation systems with more equitable outcomes for all.



The goals outlined in this report are frequently pursued under the banner of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Equity reflects fair access, opportunity, participation, resources, and outcomes. It begins with a recognition that historical and existing policies and practices have concentrated power with certain groups while disadvantaging and marginalizing other groups—including BIPOC, women, gender non-conforming people, LGBTQ+ people, and disabled people. Equity requires a critical accounting of history and its impacts, and an intentional approach to redistribute power, access, and opportunity to these groups.

Diversity allows for the presence of people, ideas, and practices—particularly from these under-represented groups—and a recognition that their contributions are important and necessary.

Inclusion creates intentional spaces and processes for these diverse perspectives, identities, and experiences to have a meaningful and impactful role in the decisions, practices, and processes that drive an agency's work and move us toward greater equity.

This report examines the state of diversity in agencies, with a focus on board leadership, and illuminates how internal and external agency efforts to implement more inclusive decision-making processes can lead to better transportation systems with more equitable outcomes for all.

- 3 There are several reports which summarize transit agency equity initiatives, including TransitCenter's Equity in Practice.
- 4 <https://transitcenter.org/how-transit-agencies-are-reallocating-service-to-prioritize-public-health-and-social-equity/>
- 5 <https://transitcenter.org/if-at-first-your-covid-service-plan-doesnt-succeed/>
- 6 <https://thesource.metro.net/2019/04/30/meeting-people-on-the-bus-green-new-deal-how-we-roll-april-30/>
- 7 <https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/las-transit-ridership-plummeting>
- 8 <https://transitcenter.org/los-angeles-bus-riders-speak-out-against-metros-bus-service-cuts/>

Transit agencies and equity practices

Public transit agencies' attention to equity has historically centered on compliance with Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits racial discrimination by programs that receive federal aid. However, compliance with Title VI only ensures that transit changes do not make racial disparities worse. There is no requirement to assess how equitable a system is or to address existing inequities. Some agencies have adopted more progressive and holistic approaches to equitable transportation policies, but most have not.

Today, as the nation confronts overlapping crises of public health threats, racial injustice, and economic inequality, momentum is building to change transit agency operations. Agencies are increasingly aware that their actions have significant consequences for racial equity and the social, economic, and health outcomes of riders, workers, and local communities.

In response, a few transit agencies have adopted official goals in relation to equity. Some have established departments of equity and inclusion, offices of diversity, or diversity and equity committees to embed such goals within agency culture and practice³. While there is no single “right” approach to this type of reform, a common theme has emerged: Leadership commitment to clear goals for racial equity is absolutely essential, regardless of the internal structure through which those goals are pursued. Without leadership commitment, agencies struggle to follow through on plans.

This was made particularly clear during the COVID-19 pandemic—agencies where leadership had made public commitments to addressing racial equity had a better record of equitably re-allocating service and protecting public health.

San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (“Muni”) launched its Muni-Equity Policy in 2014. Since then Muni has worked with community partners to improve transit in neighborhoods with high percentages of households with low incomes and people of color. Establishing racial and social impacts as a central consideration in transit planning—and engaging communities in good faith—contributed to a decision-making framework for Muni’s COVID-19 response that centered social equity. SFMTA⁴ redistributed service to minimize crowding and protect the health and safety of both the frontline transit workforce and the essential workers who continued to ride during the pandemic, workforces with a high share of Black and brown people.

In the absence of committed leadership, an equity policy alone is not enough, as seen in Los Angeles. Los Angeles Metro adopted its Equity Platform in 2018 to guide agency decision-making but has been slow to follow through and act on its stated equity commitments⁵. When the pandemic first hit, the agency cut bus service by 25% and rail service by only 15%, despite bus ridership falling less than rail ridership (65% vs. 75%). Considering roughly 90%⁶ of LA Metro’s bus riders are people of color, and L.A.’s rail system is known⁷ for connecting to the wealthier, whiter suburbs, the structure of these service cuts disproportionately disadvantaged people of color. Months into the pandemic, in the face of widespread backlash from community groups and transit advocates, the LA Metro Board voted⁸ to extend the bus service cuts, keeping it at 20% below pre-pandemic levels until the middle of 2021, significantly harming transit access for essential workers, low-income communities, and people of color in L.A. Later, advocates in Los Angeles successfully campaigned for the reinstatement of this service.



Changing power structures by changing board composition

The people who decide the big issues facing transit agencies are often the people who sit on the board of directors. Transit agency boards are typically appointed by elected officials—in some cases the mayor, in others the governor—or composed of elected officials like City Council members. (In a few rare cases, elections are held specifically for the board positions.⁹) Boards typically represent an assortment of local jurisdictions covering the region’s urban core and suburbs.

9 Boards of the Denver Regional Transportation District and two major agencies in the San Francisco Bay Area are directly elected by voters, which is very unusual.

Our analysis revealed a pattern of disparities between who sits on transit agency boards and who uses transit. “Who decides” and “who rides” are often very different, in three important ways: geography, gender, and race.

Transit agency boards have substantial authority and wide-ranging responsibilities. While they don’t—and shouldn’t—make granular decisions about service changes or individual hires (with the exception of the CEO), they do set overarching policies that guide those decisions and affect who benefits from transit service. These responsibilities include:

- Adopting budgets and capital plans
- Selecting and evaluating the agency CEO
- Endorsing major policies like the agency’s level of service standards, labor agreements, fare policies, and major procurements
- Being the interface between agency staff and the public at large, for instance by receiving public testimony at formal hearings individual board members are ideally also ambassadors on behalf of the broader community, representing the public interest, especially riders’ interests, to the agency.

Good governance and high-quality transit service depend on these boards being accountable to the public, transparent in their actions, and attuned to the needs of riders. However, most transit agency boards in the U.S. operate without much public attention, and many are unrepresentative of the public they serve, composed of people unfamiliar with transit itself or the communities and people transit serves.

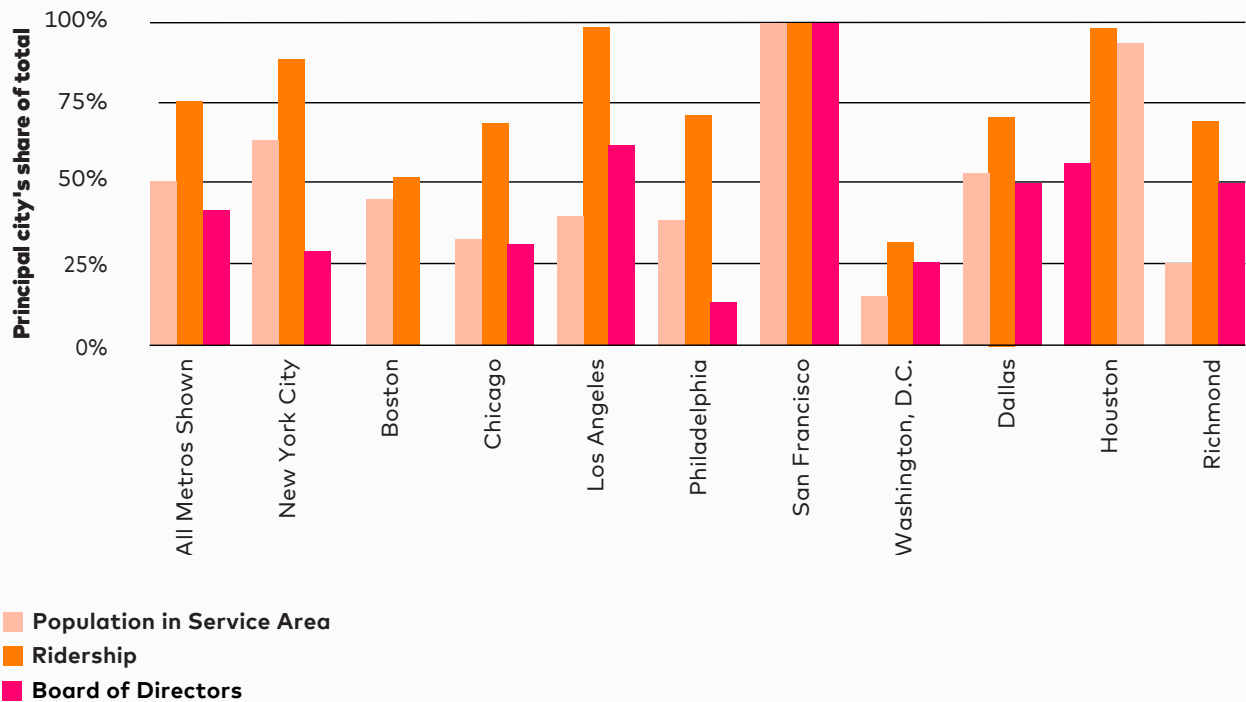
Our analysis revealed a pattern of disparities between who sits on transit agency boards and who uses transit. “Who decides” and “who rides” are often very different, in three important ways: geography, gender, and race.

Geographically, suburban jurisdictions—which are often whiter and higher income but with lower ridership per capita than urban jurisdictions—tend to be overrepresented on transit agency boards relative to population or ridership. The geographic disparity is often rooted in statutes or intergovernmental agreements which grant more board seats per capita to suburban jurisdictions than to the region’s principal city, where most of the transit riders live.

For example, whiter jurisdictions within the service areas of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority and the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority have disproportionately high representation on those agencies’ boards in relation to their share of the overall population—and even more so in relation to their share of the population who rides transit. In SEPTA’s case, 38% of the service area’s residents and 71% of its transit riders live in Philadelphia, yet only 13% of the board seats are allocated to the city’s representatives. And in the MTA service region¹⁰, 63% of residents

10 Does not include New Jersey or Connecticut

Figure 1: Are Board members geographically representative of where most riders live?



11 While New York City appointees only make up 18% of the board, they compose 29% of the voting power on the board. The votes of board members from some jurisdictions carry less weight than others.

12 The gap between "who rides" and "who decides" in NYC is compounded by the statute requiring that MTA board members be nominated by the state's governor and confirmed by the State Senate, meaning that a state senator from Niagara Falls, a district 400 miles away whose constituents don't ride or pay taxes to the MTA, has more influence over the agency board than a city council member does.

13 As seen in Figure 2.

and 88% of transit riders live in New York City, yet only 18%¹¹ of the board seats are allocated to appointees of the city.¹² In three southern U.S. cities—Richmond, New Orleans, and Savannah—suburban jurisdictions adjacent to the central city are allocated board seats even though those jurisdictions don't pay into the system or have service.

This geographic bias often carries a racial dimension and implications for representative decision-making. For example, the populations of Richmond, New Orleans, Savannah, New York, and Philadelphia—and especially the populations who ride transit—have a much higher proportion of Black residents and residents with low incomes¹³ than the adjoining jurisdictions which are granted a disproportionate number of board seats.

Out of Figure 2's 108 voting board members, only 38 (36%) are people of color, compared to 58% of the total population and 63% of transit riders. The lack of racial diversity means that those voices and experiences aren't heard and debated in those agencies' deliberations and decisions.

Figure 2: How does Board racial representation compare to that of ridership?

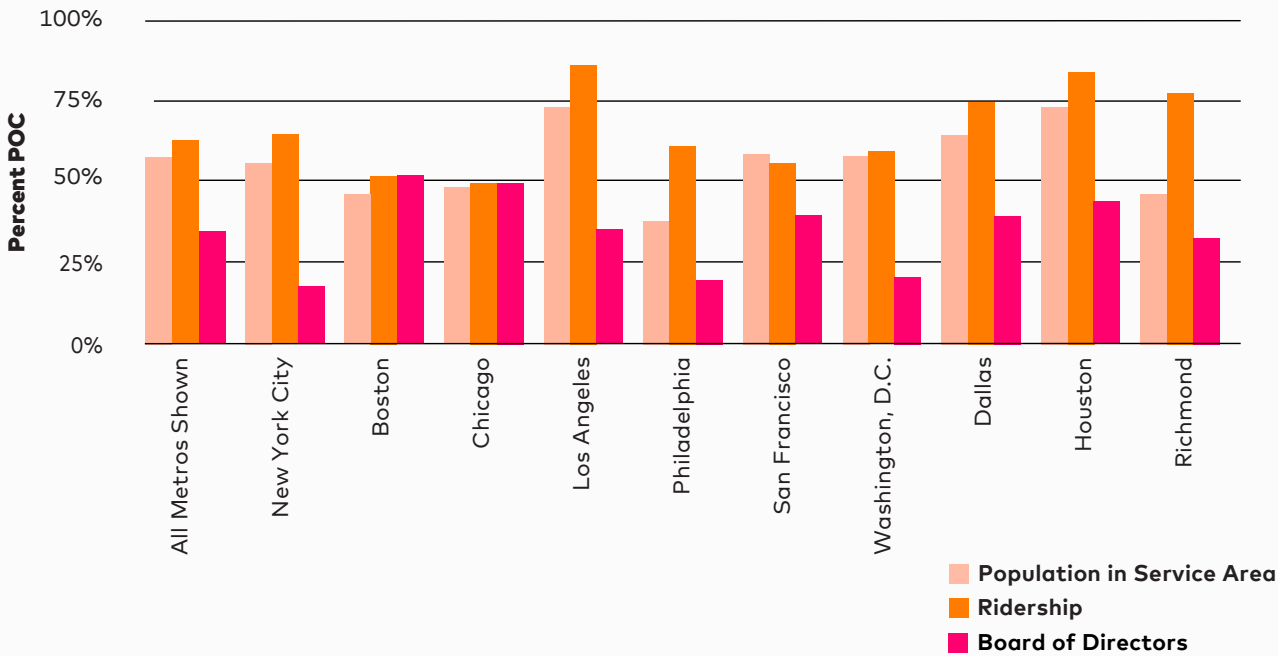
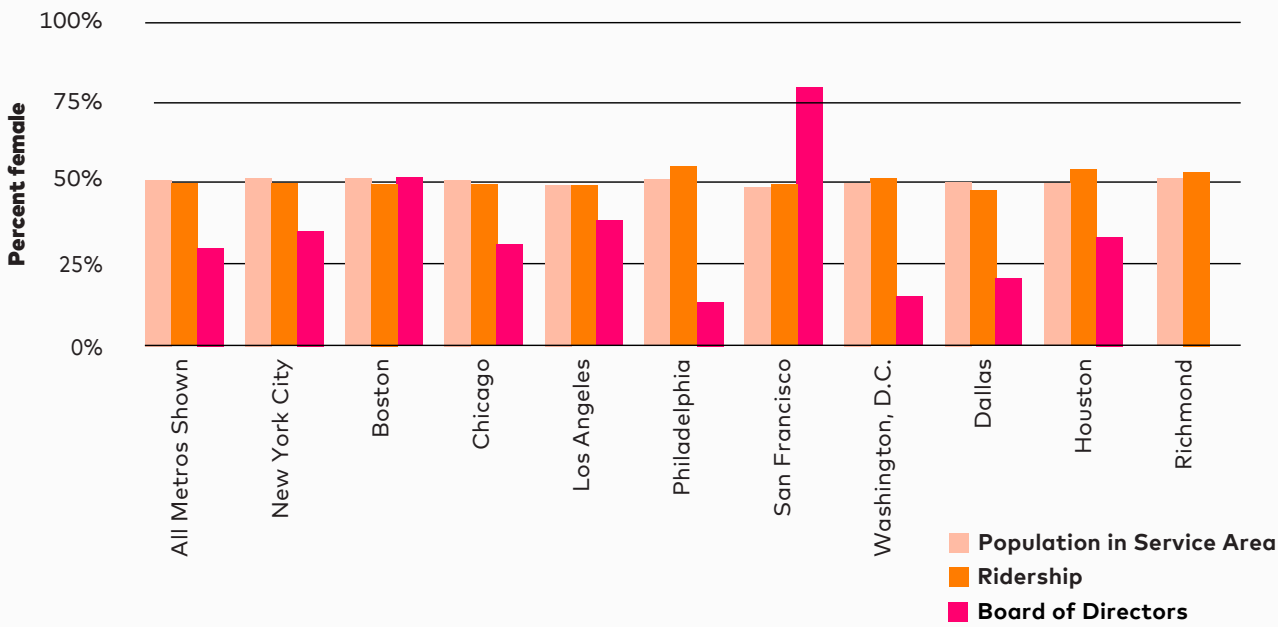


Figure 3: How does Board gender representation compare to that of ridership?





This bias plays out with major consequences in spending decisions. New York’s MTA is nearing completion on a \$11.1 billion project to bring suburbanites into midtown Manhattan on the Long Island Rail Road, while proposed capital projects within the city limits that would serve far more people and a far more diverse group of riders are delayed¹⁴. DART in the Dallas region has spent billions of dollars on low-ridership lines to low-density suburbs, while disinvesting in service in the parts of the city where potential ridership is highest.

Our analysis also revealed significant disparities in gender representation. Men in general and white men in particular are overrepresented on transit agency boards in relation to the overall population and even more so relative to transit riders.

Out of the sample’s 108 voting board members, only 32 (30%) are women, compared to 51% of the population and 51% of transit riders. Only 13% of SEPTA’s board, 14% of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority board, and 20% of the Dallas Area Rapid Transit board are women. These examples are just the most extreme in the overall pattern.

This gap in representation likely has service planning and policy consequences. For example, transit routes and schedules tend to cater to men’s travel patterns (often typical commuter patterns) at the expense of women’s travel patterns (which are often linked trips). Other aspects of policy making also suffer from the lack of representation—public safety, for example. Women experience greater violence and harassment on transit, and female/femme voices on boards would add a critical perspective to any discussion of how to enhance public safety.

To improve transit by making governing boards more responsive and representative of riders, the following actions need to be taken:

- 1.** Make the appointment structure more visible and accountable
- 2.** Ensure that appointees are demographically representative of the ridership base and ride transit themselves
- 3.** Ensure diverse participation at board meetings
- 4.** Build relationships with board members



Make the appointment structure more visible and accountable

Boards appointed by a myriad of sources can suffer from the parochialism of individual members, often lack cohesion and a common vision for the agency, and are not answerable to any one source of authority or to the public. VTA in the San Jose area is an example: Because numerous jurisdictions appoint members, nobody is in

14 Including possible investments in stations in eastern Queens that those LIRR trains speed through without stopping

Out of the sample's 108 voting board members, only 32 (30%) are women, compared to 51% of the population and 51% of transit riders.

charge or can be held to account for poor service outcomes. In other cases, even when board appointments are made by a sole elected official, accountability is diminished if the appointing official is a governor in a distant state capital who most of the public doesn't realize has that authority. The governor of New York appoints a plurality of the MTA board, for instance, and the governor of Oregon appoints the transit board for the Portland region, even though most of the revenue and ridership come from those urban regions, not from the state as a whole.

By contrast, the appointing authority for the San Francisco MTA ("Muni") board is clear and local: The mayor appoints all the members, with confirmation by the elected Board of Supervisors of the city. Riders and their advocates have no question about who is in charge of Muni: It's the mayor and Board of Supervisors. If riders are satisfied with Muni, they know they can reward those officials with reelection; if they are not satisfied with Muni, they know who to punish politically. Residents of New York City or Portland, Oregon, have no such feedback mechanism.

Changing governance structures, however, is very difficult, because they are rooted in statutes and history, and because few people who currently hold power are willing to voluntarily give it up. As TransitCenter documents in *Getting to the Route of It*, there is some value in having gubernatorial involvement. However, primary control of the transit agency should come from either the principal city it serves or some division between the service areas.



Ensure that appointees are demographically representative of the ridership base and ride transit themselves

Recently, advocates in some cities have pressured elected officials to appoint transit agency board members who are more representative of who rides transit and who themselves ride transit.

When Houston Mayor Annise Parker appointed transit rider and activist Christof Spieler to the Metro board, he brought personal knowledge of the system and what improvements might benefit riders. As a result, he was a vocal supporter as the agency decided to do a redesign of the bus network that reflected what riders said they wanted—increased frequency and a more legible system.

When New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell took office after a campaign in which she heard many concerns about transit service, she appointed commissioners who understood the priorities of transit riders, and they in turn instituted major policy and service changes.

For agencies with a stated commitment to advancing equity, board representation should be high on the list of actions to influence.



One of her appointees to the board, Fred Neal, was a founder of the civic group Ride New Orleans, with a keen grasp of the service improvements that were most important to riders.¹⁵ A critical element that led to Neal’s appointment was Ride New Orleans’ campaign for a rider-focused appointee. He says, “It is important to have people on the board that are knowledgeable about the system—advocacy organizations, like Ride, are connected to the broader community and can help identify people who are informed about transit and experience the system.” Similarly, in New York City, Mayor Bill de Blasio nominated Veronica Vanterpool, then-executive director of local advocacy group Tri-State Transportation Campaign, for a seat on the NY MTA board.

For agencies with a stated commitment to advancing equity, board representation should be high on the list of actions to influence. However, transit agency leadership and staff don’t have the ability to choose their governing board. Therefore, strategies to influence board composition fall to external advocates. Advocacy organizations watchdogging transit decision-making should make better board representation a campaign goal in their work. Having suggested criteria or even a list of potential nominees can help to sway those who have the authority to appoint new board members to make more equitable, informed decisions.



Regularly attend board meetings

Implementing more accountable structures is a long-term strategy, and pressing elected officials to make more responsive appointments to existing structures is a mid-term strategy. In the short-term, advocates can focus on influencing the decisions of current board members. Most transit boards work in obscurity, with few

¹⁵ Mr. Spieler and Mr. Neal are also trustees of TransitCenter

One of the most important things advocates can do to advance their agenda is to build trusting relationships with board members.

attendees at their meetings. Suggestions and scrutiny can influence their decision-making. Organizations like Riders Alliance in New York City and Ride New Orleans regularly attend board meetings, giving testimony on current rider needs and concerns and asking questions of board members.

While attending board meetings does have benefits, many people can't attend given conflicting work and family obligations. Board meetings need to be held at times and in ways that encourage diverse participation.



Build relationships with board members

One of the most important things advocates can do to advance their agenda is to build trusting relationships with board members. Early in 2021, for instance, advocates in Los Angeles mobilized to successfully persuade the LA Metro board to restore post-pandemic service at a faster rate than Metro's staff had originally proposed. Their efforts were successful in part because of the strong relationship between advocates and LA Council Member Mike Bonin, who sits on the LA Metro Board. Council Member Bonin regularly solicits feedback from organizations on policy. In this case, local advocacy organizations worked with him to elevate the needs of riders as the board made decisions, and pushed for immediate service restoration in the wake of better-than-expected sales tax receipts.



Changing power structures through more inclusive internal and external engagement

Advancing equity by changing agency practice is a complex task that calls for a multi-pronged, systematic approach. As transit agencies put greater emphasis on their responsibilities to combat inequities, they should change both their *internal* and *external* decision-making processes in coordinated ways.

An important step toward integrating more representative perspectives into agency decision-making and processes is building trust and rapport with frontline workers.

The coordination of internal and external equity efforts can be mutually reinforcing and bolster an agency's ability to materially improve the lives of people who've been harmed by exclusionary transit policy and planning. External equity efforts should be accompanied by strong internal practices shaped by diverse sources in the agency, fostering leadership among the workforce and empowering frontline workers to contribute to decisions.

Re-thinking internal engagement

Agencies can make decision-making more inclusive by looking within for expertise. Frontline transit employees such as bus and rail operators interact directly with the riding public on a daily basis. Frontline positions also account for a significant share of agencies' Black and brown employees. It is critical that agencies value their time and contributions as key staff who can speak to the needs of transit riders, more than 60% of whom are BIPOC.¹⁶ Similar to how riders may be excluded from service planning decisions that affect their lives, frontline workers have not always had the opportunity to contribute to agency service planning decisions. Instead, service planning decisions are typically made by management and transit planners, roles in which white and college-educated people tend to be overrepresented.

An important step toward integrating more representative perspectives into agency decision-making and processes is building trust and rapport with frontline workers. For some agencies, this may be challenging given historical tensions between labor unions, frontline workers, and management. There may be lingering distrust because management inconsistently seeks out and applies the perspectives of operators, mechanics, or cleaners. Or maybe the agency never even tried—or failed to act on what workers said. Building a relationship between frontline workers, labor unions, and management may take time, but it is always possible. Seeking frontline worker feedback and following up to incorporate their ideas builds trust, which in turn allows agencies to make better, more inclusive decisions.

16 Who Rides Public Transportation. APTA. <https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/Resources/resources/reportsandpublications/Documents/APTA-Who-Rides-Public-Transportation-2017.pdf>



Case Study: Maryland MTA

To make decisions more inclusive of frontline workers and the riding public, the Maryland Department of Transportation Maryland Transit Administration (MDOT MTA) instituted an “inreach” program and created a new role, the chief of engagement. The changes were intended to improve both internal processes and the rider experience.

The inreach program recognizes the expertise of frontline workers by directly seeking their feedback when making changes to service planning, workforce development and training, and other aspects of agency practice that affect them. By engaging operators and other frontline workers in ongoing conversations, and bringing their expertise to bear on agency operations and management decisions, the inreach program has established an agency culture that clearly values the input of its entire workforce.

While the word “engagement” might conjure thoughts of community outreach, at MDOT MTA it means much more than external, public-facing efforts. The chief of engagement and the inreach coordinator work closely to engage different divisions and workforce segments within the agency. They tie together disparate pieces of information and feedback from throughout the agency to make operations more inclusive, streamlined, and effective. Much of what drives these efforts is a recognition that each employee and division has valuable expertise that can improve performance at every level of the agency.

Both the chief of engagement role and the inreach program emerged from a 2017 bus network redesign. The project required not only innovative public engagement and outreach practices, but also new ways of engaging and empowering the agency’s frontline workforce. MDOT MTA’s CEO used the network redesign as a platform to initiate agency-wide change, institutionalizing significant shifts to the agency’s internal and external communication practices. Now, whenever agency leadership makes a decision with broad impacts on the workforce or riding public, they seek input from employees who would be most affected by that decision and who would have insight into how changes might affect riders.

“Using operator feedback to build our schedules, we saw a huge improvement in on-time performance,” said In-Reach Coordinator Keisha Farrell. “We take this information looked at in higher-level meetings, [like the reasons operators communicate why they may be ahead of schedule or how schedules are adjusted based on what operators experience out on the street], *back* to the employees and explain to them the role they play in making the agency goals a success.” This emphasis on worker feedback has had positive results. For the first time in the agency’s history, over 30% of service changes during winter 2019 schedule updates were a direct result of frontline employee input. And as of summer 2020, customer complaints were down 15% and bus compliments up 59% compared to the previous year.

When input from transit riders is collected but undervalued and underutilized, and not used as an essential component driving the project, the influence of transit riders is limited and they lose trust in the process.

Re-thinking external engagement

Transit agencies have connected with the public through outreach for decades, but centering the voices of transit riders and more equitably serving communities require shifts to these engagement practices.

Typically, opportunities for transit riders to influence decisions are limited to public comments during board meetings, or participation in tightly circumscribed public outreach activities. These activities often take the form of open houses, workshops, surveys, or presentations. They are most commonly used to update the public, solicit input to inform the work of the agency, or gain support for a project or plan. Public outreach tends to be conducted during the last phase of an agency's timeline, after a substantial number of decisions have already been made, which can significantly diminish the influence of transit riders. When input from transit riders is collected but undervalued and underutilized, and not used as an essential component driving the project, the influence of transit riders is limited and they lose trust in the process.

In our report, *Inclusive Transit: Advancing Equity Through Improved Access & Opportunity*, we identified best practices for advancing equity in community engagement, including: meeting communities when and where they are, developing and implementing innovative engagement and communication channels, partnering with and compensating community-based organizations (CBOs), and using comprehensive engagement plans.

Since the release of that report, outreach practices within the industry are starting to shift. The changes include:

- Prioritizing public outreach to communities and voices that had historically been displaced or excluded from decision-making processes.
- Distributing decision-making power more equitably.
- Engaging the public earlier and more consistently, allowing community feedback to be incorporated in project design.
- Adapting communications to different audiences, providing material that is non-technical and multilingual.
- Providing childcare to facilitate participation from parents and caretakers.
- Engaging CBOs with deep ties to communities that have been marginalized, in order to connect with transit riders most affected by changes in transit design and scheduling.

Focusing on immediate needs and benefits versus future needs and benefits increases the likelihood of community participation in a needs assessment.

By reforming public outreach with these practices, transit agencies center transit riders in their projects and plans, building strong community buy-in at the start.

SFMTA's Public Outreach and Engagement Team Strategy (POETS), for example, requires staff to have an outreach and engagement plan for each project. Ariel Ward, an SFMTA engineer who led a robust public engagement process as part of several SFMTA projects, said her own approach, when possible, is to have "the community shape the scope of the project and outcome." She stresses that jointly determining the project and working together brings communities along.

Agencies looking to reform their external engagement do not need to start from scratch: Several BIPOC transit leaders and BIPOC-led organizations have created blueprints for effective engagement strategies which can be adapted to meet an agency's needs. The Untokening's Principles for Mobility Justice call for "new decision-making systems and structures [to be] created by and for communities to center their visions and cultivate operating principles that align with their values and lived experiences."

The Greenlining Institute's Mobility Equity Strategy¹⁷ recommends beginning a project with a detailed community assessment that asks, "What are the most pressing unmet needs of particular underserved communities?" Conducting this assessment at the outset will help demonstrate how well a proposed project addresses the needs of the community, what the benefits are, who is the primary beneficiary of those benefits, and whether the proposal avoids harm to the community. Focusing on immediate needs and benefits versus future needs and benefits increases the likelihood of community participation in a needs assessment¹⁸. The community assessment should be done in three parts:

- 1. Identify community needs:** The needs assessment and subsequent idea brainstorm can take many different forms, such as community meetings, surveys or online forums.
- 2. Educate the community on mobility equity:** Educating the community on the basic principles of mobility equity and transportation burdens and benefits will help in the identification of the project needed.
- 3. Community project brainstorming.**

Once a transit agency has a better understanding of who is being excluded, a second foundational step is to understand how mobility patterns and demographics of communities surrounding the transit network have changed. In major cities like Chicago, San Francisco,

17 The Greenlining Institute, Mobility Equity Framework: How to Make Transportation Work For People

18 Page 10, The Greenlining Institute, Mobility Equity Framework: How to Make Transportation Work For People



and Portland, housing developments, transportation infrastructure, and market pressures have rapidly changed urban regions and displaced communities.

“What you see of transit right now was planned 30 years ago, the lines and connections, the community that exists there now is not necessarily the community the plan intended to serve,” said Karyssa Jackson, a community organizer with Lyft and former community outreach coordinator with Metro Transit in the Twin Cities. She stressed the importance of “knowing the community you are in, how to communicate with them, and historically what’s impacted them in order to bring them into these projects and have meaningful engagement.”

Some transit agency plans take years to complete, or alter aspects of the transit system that have not been significantly updated in decades. In those circumstances, the outreach process must anticipate and account for displacement or demographic shifts to engage the full range of people with a stake in the project’s outcome.

In Los Angeles, rapidly changing demographics and displacement prompted LA Metro to adapt their plans and outreach practices for their bus network redesign. Writing for *Curbed LA*, Elijah Chiland notes that “population data suggest there has been a demographic shift in LA County since 2014, when Metro ridership began to decline.” Between 2014 and 2017, the number of households in Los Angeles County making less than \$50,000 a year declined by 80,000. According to a Metro survey, “just 12 percent of passengers reported having a household income of more than \$50,000 per year. Meanwhile, nearly 60 percent had an income under \$20,000.” Metro Chief Operations Officer James Gallagher told Chiland, “we know that the housing stock is sort of moving around in the region, and the bus system is staying the same.”

So, for its bus network redesign, known as NextGen, LA Metro created a working group of 60 CBOs from across the service area. These organizations had direct ties to communities that have been marginalized, and they set out to gain an understanding of people's transit needs through public workshops, stakeholder meetings, and community events. Data from this process was incorporated into the analysis for the new bus network. Understanding these new residential and travel patterns proved foundational to the public outreach process and better informed the network redesign.

Centering people most affected by a plan can meaningfully shift power

Agencies have devised various ways to engage constituencies who will be most affected by a project. In New York City, the Department of Transportation (NYC DOT) Street Ambassador Program travels directly to the affected community, locates information booths in neighborhood spaces, and communicates to the public in multiple languages—and at times most convenient for them, including weekends.

The ambassador program was created in response to disparate responses to bike lane implementation, said NYC DOT Director of Public Engagement and Program Development Inbar Kishoni, creator of the Street Ambassador Program. Polls and surveys revealed people in New York City supported bike lanes, yet opposition prevailed at public meetings held by local community boards, a type of neighborhood council whose members are appointed by elected officials. The ambassador program supplements community board meetings with surveys, workshops, and other outreach activities. The team has facilitated successful implementation of major street safety projects like the redesign of Queens Boulevard, which improved infrastructure for pedestrians and bicyclists and better coordinated curb uses by local businesses. While the ambassador program is not the NYC DOT's only outreach practice, it exemplifies how agencies can meet people where they are in the planning and outreach process.

Another effective way to engage affected communities is to utilize CBOs with deep connections in neighborhoods, a method exemplified by the Oakland Department of Transportation's Bike Plan. In a recent update to the bike plan, the agency set out to gather feedback from Oakland's BIPOC communities, which have been historically disinvested and under-resourced, to determine how bike improvements could advance their needs and priorities.

“Instead of just going into an underserved neighborhood and installing bike lanes, we had a conversation with the community about the bike lanes and what they thought would be needed for neighborhood residents to be able to bike.”

A citywide, representative survey about biking in Oakland was a cornerstone of this process. A predominantly white consulting partner from an out-of-town university was selected to administer the survey. Early on, the Department of Race and Equity and OakDOT flagged problems with their approach to survey questions related to criminalization and safety. The agencies recognized the necessity of working with organizations whose staff and members had real experience biking in Oakland as Black and/or Latinx people.

The agencies made two important changes. First, they worked closely with the consultant to re-frame the questions to be more respectful, culturally responsive, and relevant to the Black and Latinx communities of Oakland. Second, they brought on and financially compensated local bike groups and community organizations with majority Black and Latinx membership and leadership. These CBOs were responsible for recruiting survey participants, which ensured that the survey and broader community engagement activities were able to reach people in Black and Latinx neighborhoods who have historically been excluded from the planning process.

The result was strong survey participation that countered prevailing stereotypes about BIPOC and biking—like the assumption that Black people don’t actually want to bike—and provided insight into how expanding bike infrastructure affects communities of color differently than white communities.

“So the plan actually changed from what the consultants thought the outcome was going to be,” said Jacque Larrainzar, equity program analyst at the Department of Race and Equity. “Instead of just going into an underserved neighborhood and installing bike lanes, we had a conversation with the community about the bike lanes and what they thought would be needed for neighborhood residents to be able to bike, like things around the community residents were telling us needed to get fixed [like street maintenance].” In addition to the importance of working with CBOs, the episode speaks to the importance of agencies critically assessing their engagement practices, adapting the public outreach to remedy potentially limiting or harmful engagement with communities.

Creating more equitable decision-making processes can also strengthen the community buy-in and success of a project. Miami Dade County contracted Transit Alliance Miami to conduct the first community-based bus network redesign public outreach process in the nation. The initial round of outreach included 50 workshops with key stakeholder groups, meetings with bus operators, a series of short

Table 1: Summary of major questions and feedback collected by Transit Alliance Miami

The Big Questions	The issues	Possible Solutions	Downsides	The questions	How did the public respond?
How Much Change?	The network design is old, and may not be the best way to serve the Miami-Dade County of today, or tomorrow.	We could redesign the network to reflect today's needs and priorities, BUT....	...many people are used to the service as it is, and will complain if we change anything.	Should we consider changing the network at all? By how much?	84% of respondents agreed that MDT should change the bus system so that people can get more places more quickly.
Ridership or Coverage?	Designing a transit system requires choosing between different goals that are both popular.	If we planned the network for higher ridership, it would be useful to more people for more purposes, BUT...	it would have to focus on places with lots of people and jobs, so it wouldn't go absolutely everywhere, or serve absolutely everyone.	How do we balance the competing goals of ridership (attract more riders by being useful to more people) and coverage (get a little bit of service to everyone)?	59% of respondents preferred the ridership concept. 26% preferred the coverage concept.
Rethink the Trolleys?	City trolleys have not been designed to work together with county buses. Sometimes a trolley and a county bus compete along the same street.	We could have more useful service if the trolleys and county buses worked together and did different things	Trolley routes are the result of a community-driven process. They are controlled by cities, not the county, and they have different fares and vehicles.	Is it worthwhile to consider redesigning the trolleys and county routes together, to get the most possible transit service for everyone?	74% of respondents agreed that the county bus network and city trolleys should be designed together so people can get more places more quickly.
Move stops farther apart?	Bus stops are often very close together, which makes service very slow.	If we space stops every 1000-1300 feet, people may walk a little further but they reach destinations sooner, because the buses run faster.	Some people have physical limitations on walking. Some places are unpleasant to walk in, especially in summer.	Should we move stops a little farther apart?	72% of respondents said that bus stops should be at least 1/4 mile apart.



videos explaining the process, and in-person and online surveys of transit riders.

The questions were accessible, non-technical, and focused on tradeoffs:

- Would you rather have a longer walk for a shorter wait, or a shorter walk with a longer wait?
- Should we remove buses on the least popular routes to increase service on the most crowded routes?
- Should we run more buses where we have the most bus riders in Miami-Dade County and less service everywhere else?

In the second phase of outreach, Transit Alliance Miami released two different concepts for the network redesign to gather more feedback. The non-technical nature of the questions made the network redesign concept accessible to people outside the transit field and prompted more feedback. In total, the outreach process generated “5,000 survey responses, 2,800 in-person interactions, 130 events/workshops/presentations, and 1,700 text conversations.”

Not every CBO has the capacity to lead an outreach process for a transit agency, but one of the key lessons from Miami is to more equitably share decision-making power. By creating a series of opportunities where the public could easily contribute to the network redesign process, Miami Dade County and Transit Alliance Miami engaged a large number of people and generated broad-based feedback that meaningfully shaped the final plan.

Contracting with CBOs can improve agencies’ external public engagement. However, it is not uncommon for CBOs to work with a

Qualitative feedback from the public about their experience is just as important as quantitative data when understanding the needs of transit riders and the communities surrounding the transit network.

multitude of government agencies across different fields, which may strain their ability to take on work for a transit agency.

If agencies are considering collaborating with CBOs, it is important to address barriers the CBOs may face. “Sometimes [CBOs] don’t have the capacity, they don’t have the tools” to successfully partner with the agency, said the SFMTA’s Ariel Ward. She encouraged agencies to consider: “How do we reshape the process of working with CBOs so it doesn’t become a further burden?” Successful external partnerships must take such questions into account and engage transit riders without creating harmful power dynamics between the agency and the CBO.

Public engagement, including the development and implementation of equitable public outreach practices, is a time- and resource-intensive process that should be prioritized and supported with adequate financial and organizational resources. Qualitative feedback from the public about their experience is just as important as quantitative data when understanding the needs of transit riders and the communities surrounding the transit network.

The best outreach processes:




- Engage the public early, deeply, and consistently;
- Proactively work to understand how communities have shifted or been displaced
- Allow substantial time in the project schedule for gathering feedback;
- Analyze which stakeholder groups should be prioritized;
- Include non-technical, multi-lingual material;
- Provide support (like childcare) to transit riders to maximize participation;
- Acknowledge and include communities typically excluded from outreach, especially groups representative of people who most rely on transit; and
- Strategically team up with CBOs with deep relationships in marginalized communities.

Public outreach is the best device at transit agencies’ disposal to shift who is included in decision-making and, in so doing, strengthen the agency’s ability to provide safe and equitable transit.

Conclusion

There are many ways transit agencies can begin to rectify how their past decisions contributed to the exclusion and harm of communities of color. Shifting who holds decision-making power—at the executive level, within the whole transit workforce, and in the public engagement process—is important to achieving that goal. To create better transit systems and achieve equitable outcomes, public transit agencies and the people who oversee them need to have more representative boards, design more inclusive decision-making processes within agencies, and conduct meaningful public engagement where those most affected are able to wield influence.

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