

TransitCenter

# Strategic Plan





### Dear Partners

Since 2013, TransitCenter has worked to secure a just and sustainable future with abundant public transportation options. As we enter our next chapter, we recognize that the transit landscape has evolved significantly, presenting both challenges and opportunities that require a new approach. Today, transit in the United States faces critical issues:

- Declining ridership, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic
- Inadequate funding mechanisms
- An impending fiscal cliff threatening 51% of surveyed transit agencies by 2028
- Governments allocating a larger share of their budgets to roads and highways than to public transit, without sufficient consultation with communities to understand their needs

Yet, across these challenges, organizations across the country are advancing efforts for more and better mobility options, and we see increased awareness of transit's crucial role in addressing broader societal needs and issues. In the November 2024 elections, three-fourths of local ballot measures to fund and expand transit were approved, reflecting communities' recognition of transit's role in enhancing affordability and providing access to the places, goods, and services they need. Transit access is no longer just about transportation; it is a powerful means to reduce household costs, increase affordability of our metropolitan areas and states, build wealth, create safe spaces for families to thrive, ensure healthier air to breathe, and expand access to opportunities that have long been out of reach. This expanded understanding presents an opportunity to integrate transit into a wider set of agendas, regional and national connections, and build a more powerful, diverse coalition for change.

After an extensive strategic planning process and a forward-looking assessment of what it will take to win in the next decade, we are doubling down on our capacity as a funder. We are shifting our focus to support, grow, and strengthen the movement that creates the room and provides the support for government to take meaningful action, driving the transformation of transit into a service that truly meets the needs of communities.

TransitCenter will still hold and strengthen relationships with key stakeholders including researchers, transit agencies, philanthropy, and decision-makers, and will fund the production of insights and communications that make the case for the power of public transit. Our most significant role, however, will be to serve as a movement catalyst, supporting grassroots and grassstops organizations to lead transformative campaigns and accelerating their efforts to achieve high-impact wins.

Thank you for sharing our belief that cities and communities across the United States deserve access to just, sustainable, and abundant public transit. We hope to continue to build together on this next phase of our journey.

Sincerely,  
 Fred Neal Jr. / Chair, Board of Trustees  
 and Stephanie Lotshaw / Executive Director

# Meeting the Moment

The U.S.'s transportation system generates 29% of its greenhouse gas emissions while constraining Americans' mobility and economic choices. 45% of Americans lack public transit, forcing them to spend over \$12,000 a year on car ownership. This strains household budgets and leaves people breathing unhealthy air, navigating unsafe streets, and disconnected from each other.

Decades of systemic underfunding have pushed transit agencies toward collapse. Fifty-one percent of agencies face fiscal insolvency by 2028, trapped in cycles of service cuts that reduce ridership and public trust. Longstanding federal policy exacerbates this: 80% of federal transportation funding prioritizes highways, leaving transit starved for stable revenue and unable to deliver reliable service.

Without stable revenue sources, public frustration with transit grows. Our opponents exploit these challenges to justify continuing to prioritize road expansion, reinforcing the false notion that transit is an inherently inferior transportation mode. The reality is that transit is an essential service that lowers household costs, improves public health, creates vibrant, safe communities, and reduces emissions—but has thus far lacked the investment needed to deliver on its full potential.

At the same time, the movement to change these conditions has also struggled to build sufficient power. Advocacy for transit has been underfunded and overlooked, limiting its ability to build power and effectively counter the opposition. We are at an inflection point, one that may determine whether transit survives or disintegrates.

Recognizing the gravity of this moment and the need for a well-funded movement to counter the substantial headwinds transit faces, we are committing even more resources to this work.

**To accomplish this, we will spend out our endowment over the next 12 years to build a powerful, coordinated movement capable of securing the stable funding and policy changes needed to improve lives today and for generations to come.**

True transformation requires a collective effort—it demands strategic coordination across grassroots and policy organizations and stronger philanthropic investment. We will deploy our resources more aggressively while working to bring in greater funding for the movement as a whole. By uniting these essential partners, we will build collective power, ensure transit's long-term viability, and drive the systemic change needed to create safe, vibrant, and just communities.



## Our theory of change

*We envision thriving U.S. cities and regions with dramatically expanded public transportation that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, enhance economic mobility, and improve public health.*

The allocation of transportation funding in the U.S. is heavily skewed toward expanding road capacity, leaving public transit underfunded and underdeveloped. We must transform how transportation is funded and how resources are allocated, prioritizing investments that enhance public transit and benefit riders and communities.

Historically, public transit has lacked a constituency powerful enough to challenge entrenched interests. Our theory of change is that growing the collective power of grassroots organizations, policy advocates, and allied stakeholders will drive decision-makers to adopt funding mechanisms and spending strategies that prioritize public transit as essential to serving the public. This movement will be unified by a shared goal, a clear message, and the ability to effectively counter opposition.

# Our strategies

**Our goal, as we spend out our endowment in the next 12 years, is to build the movement infrastructure to transform transportation funding and spending.**

**To build that movement, we work in four interconnected ways: local power building, engaging and mobilizing diverse stakeholders, mobilizing philanthropy, and narrative change.**



## Local power building

Strengthen local organizing, mobilize key constituencies, and build a base for transit advocacy.

## Broadening the stakeholders for transit

To inform state and local work

## Mobilizing philanthropy

To create impact at scale

## Narrative Change

To reframe transit as an essential service worthy of greater funding.

## Local power building

*Strengthen local organizing, mobilize key constituencies, and build a base for transit advocacy.*

Grassroots organizing is essential to making public transportation a public and political priority—translating people power into political power. To build and maintain this power, we must organize in unprecedented numbers, and we need our movement to be equipped to create lasting change. We will engage the most effective advocates in communities where the conditions for change are ripest and invest in their ability to win by building their capacity, connecting them to build a nationwide community and movement, and creating platforms and convenings where they can share knowledge.

**Our impact:** If successful, we will see powerful organizations and coalitions secure increased investment in transit at the state and regional levels, prioritizing transportation solutions that reflect communities' needs and aspirations. Through collaboration and cross-pollination, organizations in states around the country will share goals, successes, strategies, and skills to achieve even greater victories.

## Broadening the stakeholders for transit

*To inform state and local work*

While local and grassroots organizations can form the core of a powerful movement for transit, the inclusion of and collaboration with policy organizations and business, labor, and government stakeholders is critical. Grassroots advocates often need support on the design of policy recommendations (from research by policy and research organizations) and support in developing political will (from business, labor, and government stakeholders). TransitCenter will connect these groups by supporting practical, campaign-advancing research and fostering new connections.

**Our impact:** If successful, the movement in support of transit is composed of many different types of organizations. Local and grassroots organizations collaborate with policy organizations, business organizations, labor, and government stakeholders to achieve shared goals. Campaigns are informed by practical, well-coordinated policy analysis. Relationships between these diverse groups are strong and collaborative, resulting in a coordinated movement.

## Mobilize philanthropy to increase funding dedicated to transit:

*To create impact at scale*

At TransitCenter, we are both a grantmaker—providing financial support for transit advocacy—and a resource to other philanthropic organizations, demonstrating how transit is a critical tool for building more just, sustainable, and democratic communities. Historically, philanthropy has often overlooked the role of transit in shaping equitable and thriving communities. By highlighting its transformative impact, we help funders recognize that investing in transit is a critical pathway to creating a just and sustainable future for all.

**Our impact:** A diverse group of philanthropic leaders will recognize the critical role transit plays in advancing their goals and will take action to fund advocacy for transit at the scale needed to achieve meaningful change. This support will manifest through both collaborative projects and independent initiatives. We will actively monitor and assess the overall level of investment in transit advocacy, and showcase the tangible outcomes of philanthropic engagement.

## Narrative Change

*To shift the narrative so that people see transit as an essential service deserving of more funding*

We must shift the narrative so that many more Americans see transit as an essential service deserving of more funding and priority than it currently receives. The prevailing narrative that car-centered lifestyles symbolize freedom and that transit is an unsafe, inferior product that wastes public funds has long impeded the work of advocates. We must sow a different narrative—leading with shared values—that highlights the flaws in our current transportation priorities, fostering a growing awareness of the need for improvement and galvanizing support for change.

**Our impact:** A national leadership body will regularly develop and refine pro-transit messaging to support movement campaigns. Transit advocates and allies will have access to shared communications resources to build support for local campaigns and make rapid interventions in regional and national transit-related conversations. In addition, advocates will advance long-term narrative change efforts across different communications channels and media venues.

# How we work



TransitCenter invests in organizations working in state and metropolitan areas across the U.S. with the following conditions in place to impact successful campaigns.

1. Favorable transportation conditions, with an existing transit network poised for upgrades and growth, are supported by proposed projects to boost community mobility.
2. A favorable political climate at the local and state level, including a mobilized grassroots community, civic leadership, and philanthropic organizations working in concert to win transit-supportive policies.
3. Regions with existing density or experiencing major growth with supportive land use policies and investments (like sidewalks and housing density) where transit can be successful.

We also play an active role to build capacity and the connective tissue that grows and helps shape the movement.

## Our organizational values

Our organizational values shape how we work internally together and influence how we engage with external stakeholders and partners.

### Collaboration

Because no individual, organization, or movement can create change alone, we embrace an approach grounded in humility, reflecting a commitment to work together constructively and productively.

### Trust

We strive for our relationships to be defined by integrity and confidence in the leadership and visions of local organizations, partners, and amongst our team.

### Curiosity

We strive to find new possibilities and explore how we can support or build upon the work of grantees and allies. To that end, we are always open to learning and unlearning.

### Transformational Impact

Today's transportation status quo is broken, and we are committed to advancing a future where abundant public transportation enables all communities to thrive, confident that, together, we can turn this vision into reality.

# Looking ahead

Securing a more just and sustainable future with abundant public transportation requires transforming how transportation is funded and how resources are allocated—but this work is bigger than any one organization and issue area. It demands a broad, collective movement composed of community members, riders, advocates, policymakers, storytellers, and philanthropy, among many others.

We welcome you to work alongside us and be part of a growing movement that recognizes transit as a critical issue—one that is deeply connected to climate action, economic justice, and healthy, thriving communities. By building strong relationships and collective power, we can create a future where thriving states and metro areas have abundant public transit for all.





## TransitCenter

TransitCenter is a private foundation that works to secure a more just and sustainable future with abundant public transportation options. For more information, please visit [www.transitcenter.org](http://www.transitcenter.org).

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## Acknowledgements

This strategy was accomplished through a year of discussions with grantees, governmental and nongovernmental experts from around the U.S., fellow partners in philanthropy, and through internal deliberations - staff and Trustees - across the foundation. We thank all those who contributed their time and expertise and hope this strategy provides a window into our work, as well as outlines key issues that must be addressed to achieve our mission and goals.