

## Transportation Equity: Opportunities for Multiracial Advocacy

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Questions about transportation are prominent on both the local and national public agenda. In 2009, the federal Surface Transportation Policy Act will be reauthorized with more than \$300 billion in public investment at stake. At the same time, local communities are grappling with escalating gas prices and mounting infrastructure challenges as exemplified by the Minnesota bridge collapse. This reauthorization of federal transportation funding provides an unprecedented opportunity to connect transportation to a broader equity agenda and create and sustain healthy communities. By connecting transportation to issues such as housing, job creation, infrastructure, and health, a progressive new policy can reverse persistent inequities for low-income families, including African American, Latino, and other communities of color.

### Facts

After World War II, transportation policies emphasized highway development over public transportation, causing Americans to become increasingly mobile and more reliant on vehicles for travel. The trend continues today, as the vast majority of Americans rely on cars to meet their transportation needs. But since personal income is a determining factor of whether one is able to afford a car, rates of auto ownership vary by race. Nationally, more than 93 percent of White households own autos, while 76 percent of African American households, 83 percent of Latino households, and 87 percent of Asian American households own cars.<sup>1</sup> One in three Americans do not have a driver's license and undocumented immigrants face major barriers in obtaining a driver's license. Even so, not all licensed drivers can afford to own a personal vehicle. The lack of transportation for the poorest victims of Hurricane Katrina is a stark reminder of our country's economic and social inequity. Many of the African American residents in New Orleans did not own a car. An estimated 134,000 residents of New Orleans, including 35 percent of the African American population and 59 percent of poor Black households, did not have transportation to evacuate when the hurricane struck.<sup>2</sup>

Complicating transportation needs is a history of racial discrimination and urban white flight that has contributed to a spatial mismatch between the residential location of low-income urban households and the location of suitable jobs, often located in suburbs inaccessible to public transportation. Given low rates of car ownership and high poverty, it is not surprising that "...persistent racial housing segregation in U.S. metropolitan areas coupled with spatial decentralization of employment have left Black and, to a lesser extent, Latino workers physically isolated from ever-important suburban employment centers...This spatial disadvantage literally removes many suburban locations from the opportunity sets of inner-city minority workers."<sup>3</sup>

The search for affordable housing has also driven many low-income families and people of color farther away from their jobs or social networks, dramatically

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increasing their transportation costs and commute times. Housing and transportation are the two largest expenses for many households. A clear trade-off exists for working families between housing and transportation expenses.<sup>4</sup> Families that spend 30 percent or less of their total budget on housing spend nearly one-quarter of their budget on transportation—as families choosing an area with lower housing costs accept longer commutes and higher transportation costs.<sup>5</sup> For low-income families, these cost burdens greatly affect their quality of life. Thirty-two percent of African American and 25 percent of Latino households live in neighborhoods with high housing and high transportation costs.<sup>6</sup>

## **Implications**

Public transit plays an important role in ensuring basic mobility needs for many communities of color and low-income families who either cannot afford a car or are unable to drive.<sup>7</sup> Many rely on public transit for commuting to jobs, accessing education, obtaining medical care, shopping for basic necessities, and attending religious services. Only 3 percent of Whites use public transportation to get to work, compared with 12 percent of African Americans, 9 percent of Latinos, and 10 percent of Asian Americans.<sup>8</sup> In urban areas, African Americans and Latinos together comprise 54 percent of those who depend on public transportation (62 percent of bus riders, 35 percent of subway riders, and 29 percent of commuter rail riders.)<sup>9</sup> How is it then that public transportation receives only a fraction of the government funding spent on highways and roads?

Nationally, there is a unique and timely opportunity to build a strong multiethnic coalition around the issues of transportation equity. In the face of predictions that the federal Highway Trust Fund will face a multibillion dollar deficit by 2009, a central debate around the surface transportation authorization will undoubtedly focus on identifying sustainable mechanisms for funding the nation's transportation system over the long haul. The situation is dire—a number of states including Pennsylvania, Colorado, and Massachusetts all have indicated that their systems are in a state of fiscal crisis. A range of financing ideas—from a dramatic increase in the gas tax to identifying alternative financing mechanisms (e.g., carbon tax, increased sales tax, cap and trade agreements)—has emerged. A related set of issues concerns the role of user fees (e.g., congestion pricing, toll concessions, and other financing options) that are being considered by state and federal officials as they wrestle with funding shortfalls, inadequate highway capacity, and rising levels of congestion.

## **Policy Solutions**

Within this climate, an effective transportation policy framework must include at least the following elements: 1) real options and alternatives; 2) access to quality employment; 3) opportunities for more equitable development; 4) fairness in the impacts of growth; 5) individual and community health; and 6) environmental sustainability.

### **Real Options and Alternatives**

Advocates of African American and Latino communities sense an opportunity for their communities with the coming reauthorization. They acknowledge, however, two central challenges. First, we must be vigilant that principles, policies, and

projects recognize and address historic inequities in investment decisions that plague these communities even today. Second, we must be certain that the mechanisms used to finance the reauthorization do not further penalize these communities through regressive pricing structures and financing strategies.

Advocates see an opportunity to question who will benefit and who will be burdened by various financing proposals. Most of the discussion seems to focus primarily on which sources have the ability to raise revenue, promote targeted investment, address externalities, influence traveler behavior, and reflect the actual costs that users impose on the highway system. Different revenue generators have varying effects on different segments of the population. How will lower income people and communities of color be impacted by the potential revenue sources? Understanding income equity impacts is essential in order to make recommendations regarding funding mechanisms.

Advocacy is one of the real options for influencing transportation policies. Other potential advocacy opportunities include (but are not limited to):

- Developing a two-pronged approach to measuring economic and social equity—both as a discrete performance indicator as well as a metric that is woven in throughout the various policy categories of the federal surface transportation bill.
- Creating an overarching indicator of economic and social equity that would focus on whether the distribution of benefits is equitable across communities.
- Ensuring adequate access to transportation infrastructure for traditionally marginalized communities.
- Improving transportation access in low-income communities by increasing the proportion of households living within one-quarter mile access to public transit, and increasing the proportion of workers within one-half mile access to regional bus, rail, or ferry link.

**Bus Riders Union/Sindicato de Pasajeres**

One of the most successful models of coalition-building and advocacy around the issues of transportation equity has been the Los Angeles Bus Riders Union (BRU or Sindicato de Pasajeres), a project of the Labor Community Strategy Center. Doing most of its organizing on and around buses and bus stops in Los Angeles, they also reach out to South/East L.A., Pico Union, and Koreatown—where there are communities of low-income and transit-dependent families. The BRU has won solid victories: replacing 2,000 dilapidated diesel buses with buses that use compressed natural gas, significantly reducing air pollution; increasing the city's bus fleet by 350 buses; hiring more than 700 bus drivers; and making public transportation more affordable for low-income families. A key aspect of the BRU's organizing leadership development creates a democratic, multilingual, multiracial, gender-balanced organizing that uses anti-racism as a foundation for its organizing work.

**Access to Quality Employment**

Addressing spatial mismatch and improving access to jobs has been one of the concerns of transportation equity advocates. The success of welfare-to-work programs has relied on access to and the quality of public transit. In another

effort, the Transportation Equity Network helped to address community priorities in the Job Access and Reverse Commute Program in the 1998 transportation reauthorization, a \$750 million program to provide mobility options to low-income people.

The transportation sector itself—including construction, maintenance, and operation—is a large and growing source of employment. The Federal Transportation Authority estimates that every \$1 billion spent on transportation infrastructure creates at least 47,000 jobs and up to \$6 billion in additional gross domestic product.<sup>10</sup> In order to ensure that access to jobs and business opportunities in the transportation sector are fully open to people from all communities, targeted workforce development strategies are critical. Such strategies include using union labor on publicly-funded projects, expanding building trades' apprenticeship programs in low-income communities of color, and tapping the rapidly growing "green collar" construction sector, which unifies alternative energy, conservation, and transportation.

### **Opportunities for More Equitable Development**

Affordable housing advocates have identified several strategies that are helping to reshape the urban landscape and address the growing housing and transportation dilemma. One such strategy is transit oriented development, which can be a way to expand the supply of affordable housing in inner-city and older suburban neighborhoods. Recognizing that the demand for housing in these locations could actually displace African American, Latino, and other communities of color, coordinated advocacy for affordable housing in transit oriented development has emerged in a number of metropolitan regions, often bridging ethnic differences.<sup>11</sup>

### **Fairness in the Impacts of Growth**

The impacts of transportation facilities should not be disproportionately borne by low-income communities that are located near ports, rail yards, freeways, bus maintenance facilities, and other transportation facilities and infrastructure. Too often these facilities—and the deleterious environmental and health impacts that they produce—disproportionately impact communities with high concentrations of Latinos and African Americans.

Another facet of transportation policies that have impacted growth and sprawl are those that have caused displacement among communities of color and low-income neighborhoods. Constructing and locating highway projects in and through these neighborhoods across the country have hindered the ability of families to gain access to housing. Highway construction projects have destroyed tens of thousands of residential units occupied by people of color and low-income households. In some cases, local advocates have fought and prevented widespread displacement of these households. For example, during the 1994 proposed extension to the Long Beach Freeway (I-710) in Southern California, advocates successfully used a lawsuit to demonstrate disproportionate impact in communities of color.

### **Individual and Community Health**

There is a growing movement to link transportation to health and land use. Advocates, public officials, the private sector, and philanthropy are creating a vision for healthy people living in healthy places, with an understanding that where children and adults live, learn, work, and play affects their well-being. Health advocates are a natural ally to transportation campaigns for many reasons:

investments in clean transit can reduce traffic congestion and improve air quality and decrease asthma triggers; transit options increase access to parks and amenities that encourage exercise/fitness and decrease obesity; and better transportation policies enhance access to health services, contributing to improved health. However, the number of public health advocates working on transportation policy is relatively small. New tools are emerging to draw a clearer connection between health and transportation. In San Francisco, for example, the Department of Public Health, in consultation with a cluster of community-based organizations, created the Healthy Development Measurement Tool ([www.thehdmtool.org](http://www.thehdmtool.org)) to assess the impact of growth proposals, plans, and city services on overall health and well-being.

**The Coalition for Clean & Safe Ports**

In 2007, the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach announced a Clean Air Action Plan that seeks to reduce port-related emissions by at least 45 percent over the next five years, in part by requiring that the trucks that service the ports reduce their pollution by 80 percent. The Coalition for Clean & Safe Ports, a diverse alliance of 35 environmental, labor, faith-based, community, and public-health organizations working to promote sustainable trade at the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports, saw the Clean Air Action Plan as an opportunity to negotiate the terms of a community benefits agreement in an industry much like defense contracting, and enlist strong community buy-in.

**Environmental Sustainability**

Since the 1980s, the environmental justice (EJ) movement has worked to show that low-income communities and people of color face the brunt of negative impacts from transportation investment. Air pollutants, traffic, noise, and soil hazards caused by goods and freight movement are disproportionately borne by low-income communities located nearest to ports, rail yards, freeways and other large industrial facilities. EJ leaders<sup>12</sup> have done impressive research, and achieved legal, organizing, and policy gains in addressing inequitable distributions of environmental burdens as well as access to environmental goods such as nutritious food, clean air/water, parks/recreation, transportation, and safe jobs.

Transportation policies must also promote environmental sustainability by reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, conserving energy, and otherwise reducing resource use. The costs of attaining sustainability in transportation, as reflected in fees, taxes, and the price of energy, should be allocated equitably across the population. In California, Assembly Bill 32 mandates municipalities to reduce passenger car GHG emissions to 1990 levels by 2020—a reduction of about 25 percent—and then mandates a further 80 percent reduction below 1990 levels by 2050. Additional funding resources will be needed to help cities, which face budget deficits, meet the standards.

**Conclusion**

Transportation is a means—not an end—and the outcomes and performance indicators used to guide transportation investment should reflect this principle. A critical area of focus should be ensuring that future transportation investments benefit all communities. The 2009 reauthorization is a chance to examine the purposes of transportation, and thereby create policies by which healthy and just communities can be created and sustained.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census (2000).

<sup>2</sup> Eva Paterson, "End Race Discrimination in Public Transport Today," *Race, Poverty & the Environment: A Journal for Social and Environmental Justice*, Winter 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Rafael and Michael Stoll in *The Brookings-Wharton Papers on Urban Economic Affairs*, edited by William G. Gale and Janet Rothenberg Pack, (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> A 2006 study by the Center for Housing Policy.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara J. Lipman, "A Heavy Load: The Combined Housing and Transportation Burdens on Working Families," Center for Housing Policy, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Found at: <http://www.nhc.org/index/heavyload>.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Hanson and Genevieve Giuliano, *The Geography of Urban Transportation*, Guilford Press, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas W. Sanchez, Marc Brennman, Jacinta S. Ma, and Richard H. Stolz, "The Right to Transportation: Moving to Equity," American Planning Association, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas W. Sanchez, Rich Stolz, and Jacinta S. Ma, "Moving to Equity: Addressing Inequitable Effects of Transportation Policies on Minorities," a joint report of the UCLA Civil Rights Project and the Center for Community Change, June 2003.

<sup>10</sup> John Iron, "Investing in U. S. Infrastructure: Promoting Economic Stimulus and Growth," Briefing Paper #217, Economic Policy Institute, April 29, 2008. Found at: <http://www.sharedprosperity.org/bp217.html>.

<sup>11</sup> In recent years such advocacy initiatives have emerged in Boston, Minneapolis, Seattle, Washington, D.C., and various communities in the San Francisco Bay Area.

<sup>12</sup> Such EJ leaders include Dr. Robert Bullard, founder of the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University, Peggy Shepard, executive director and co-founder of West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc. (WE ACT), and Dr. Beverly Wright, founder of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice in New Orleans.