

Transportation Equity a Key to Winning Full Civil Rights

By Lexer Quamie

Equity in transportation means a system that works for everyone and at many different levels. Especially in these times of high unemployment and unprecedented income inequality, transportation policy is one of the most pressing civil and human rights issues facing our nation.

The choices we make with respect to federal transportation policy have an enormous impact on our economy, our health, and our climate. But these decisions about policy and funding are rarely made in consultation with, or with consideration for the low-income people who rely so heavily on public transportation. Spending programs do not benefit all populations equally and the negative impacts of some transportation decisions—historic neighborhoods dissected by freeways, stable communities disrupted, and the transit-dependent isolated from essential services through cutbacks—are broadly felt and have long-lasting effects. The unequal allocation of resources and access to affordable transportation—often along class and racial lines—has been termed by some as “transportation apartheid.”

The struggle to end “transportation apartheid” is rooted in the civil rights movement and resistance to the infamous “separate but equal” doctrine encouraged by *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In 1953, roughly half a century after *Plessy* relegated “coloreds” to the back of the bus, blacks in Baton Rouge, Louisiana staged what historians believe to be the first bus boycott of the civil rights movement. Two years later, Rosa Parks’ arrest for refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery city bus sparked the bus boycott that ignited the civil rights movement. Now, 50 years later, in spite of other significant social and economic gains, transportation still remains a crucial civil rights priority.

Reauthorization Bill Presents Key Opportunity

The renewal of the nation’s federal transportation law, now under consideration in Congress, is one of the

best opportunities the country has to align the investment of hundreds of billions of transportation dollars with the goals of improving social equity and public health, protecting the environment, and strengthening local communities through economic advancement.

The transportation sector generates millions of jobs and fuels economic growth by supporting manufacturing, construction, and public transportation activities. For every \$1 billion invested in public transportation, an estimated 36,000 jobs are created; and every \$1 invested generates almost \$4 in economic benefits, according to the American Public Transportation Association’s report, “Public Transportation: Moving America Forward.”

The reauthorization bill has the potential to create hundreds of thousands of jobs in the transportation sector and related projects. It is critically important, therefore, to maximize the job-creation power of every transportation dollar spent by: (a) selecting modes of transportation that generate the most jobs; (b) incentivizing projects that locate jobs in underserved communities; and (c) vigorously enforcing equal opportunity programs and grants that target disadvantaged businesses.

Ironic as the statement may seem, more federal funds must be made available to serve the transportation needs of public transit workers. We must invest in transit options that will enable low-income people to reach a greater variety of job opportunities—including transportation projects in outlying areas.

While transportation construction can provide good-paying jobs, many job sites in growing metropolitan and suburban areas are inaccessible to urban and rural

workers without cars. As a matter of fact, jobs in car-dependent areas are disproportionately inaccessible to people of color: 19 percent of blacks and 13.7 percent of Latinos lack access to cars, compared with only 4.6 percent of whites. Transportation investment decisions of recent years—a combination of severe service cuts and fare hikes—have only made many more jobs inaccessible to low income communities and people communities of color.



Effects on Individual and Community Health

Transportation policy that fails to consider the needs of low-income and minority communities can have extreme and cascading health consequences on those communities. Whether it is lack of physical access to health services and nutritious fresh food or levels of air pollution caused by traffic, our current transportation policy generates public health problems that disproportionately affect low-income communities and communities of color.

A car-dependent infrastructure is a barrier to health care access and poses several health hazards—ranging from asthma to obesity. Transportation policy needs to shift a portion of the investment away from new highway construction towards expanding public transportation and building bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly roads to promote greater parity in health care access, as well as to decrease health hazards, such as pollution and pedestrian fatalities. Curbing the expansion of metropolitan areas over vast distances will also result in more compact communities where non-automobile transportation options are even more efficient and attractive.

As Congress considers a reauthorization of our nation's surface transportation programs, which will allocate significant federal funds to infrastructure, civil and human rights advocates have an opportunity to advance a public health agenda by participating in the policy-making process.

The Intersection of Housing and Transportation

When the cost of transportation is factored in, affordable housing choices usually come up less favorable than they appear to be. It is vital that civil rights advocates urge policymakers to prioritize projects that

include strategies to preserve and create affordable housing for all income levels close to public transportation and other community amenities.

In addition to focusing on the creation of livable communities with resources to support local, multi-modal transportation projects, federal transportation investments should provide station area planning grants to help communities maximize the economic potential of existing and future transportation investments; expand and/or preserve affordable housing near public transportation, quality schools, and job centers; and revitalize economically distressed areas.

To produce and preserve truly affordable housing, transportation investments must address the following: affordable alternatives to cars; reduction in transportation costs for communities with lower housing and rental costs; development of affordable housing near jobs and vice versa; desegregation on a regional or metropolitan scale, not just a local scale; and prevention of displacement of low-income people from transit-rich areas.

Let's Invest Transportation Dollars Wisely

Today, most housing stock is not accessible by public transit nor is it located in pedestrian- or bike-friendly areas close to jobs. When families seek housing with lower rents and mortgages, they have to move to the suburbs, which raises their transportation costs. Currently, working families in the 28 largest metropolitan areas spend about 57 percent of their income on housing and transportation, with roughly 29 percent going to transportation.

Our transportation dollars have limitless potential to help our communities, as long as we make targeted and equitable investments to provide access to opportunity for all. Indeed, transportation is a key component in addressing poverty, unemployment, health, and community development needs. ■