

A National Transportation Equity Movement for Real Human Needs

By Rich Stolz

In August 2005, the combined efforts of hundreds of community-based, grassroots advocacy and organizing groups succeeded in advancing a broad-based agenda for transportation reform in national legislation. Most media outlets viewed the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act—A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) through the lens of specific highway or transit projects, or chose to criticize the bill's spending excess. When the dust cleared, advocates for transportation equity had more to work with than anyone could have imagined only two years ago.

The Wins

The final bill, which authorized \$286 billion in federal spending on transportation projects over a six-year period, included a number of provisions driven primarily by low-income grassroots constituencies. Many of the changes reflected, word for word, the language suggested by grassroots organizations:

- Open up more than \$200 billion in federally-funded highway projects to local hiring, specifically to create job training and employment opportunities for residents of low-income and minority communities.
- Guarantee more than \$700 million—over six years—for the Job Access and Reverse Commute program, a transportation welfare-to-work fund to help low-wage workers access job opportunities otherwise out of their reach.
- Place stronger public participation requirements on States and regional transportation planning organizations to involve stakeholders, including users of public transportation, in the planning process.
- Emphasize funding accountability with requirements, such as a published “annual list of projects”, to provide communities a handle on tracking the distribution of federal transportation dollars.

- Set aside additional resources to study and assess the impact of transportation funding and planning decisions on low-income and transit-dependent populations.

These victories were largely due to the work of the Transportation Equity Network (TEN) (www.transportationequity.org), a national coalition of grassroots organizations and their allies committed to making the transportation decision-making process responsive to the needs of low-income and transit-dependent communities. Members of TEN include community- and institution-based organizing networks, statewide coalitions, disability rights and environmental activists, and public transportation and smart-growth advocates. Partners in the campaign involved bus rider unions from Los Angeles and Vermont, grassroots groups from Montgomery, Alabama, and Lincoln, Nebraska, and almost every state in between.

Key Factors in the Fight

One of the most important drivers for transportation legislation—at all levels of government—is money. Elected officials barter for prominent roles on key committees in Congress to ensure that they can bring projects to their communities. The dominant actors in transportation policy continue to be road builders, contractors, building trade and labor unions, developers, and representatives of industry sectors,

including trucking, railways, automobile, and public transit. Over the last two decades, however, organizations like Mothers Against Drunk Driving, pedestrian safety and bicycle advocates, disability rights activists, and advocates for seniors have been competing, successfully, for the attention of policy makers.

The most notable example of the efforts of this broad coalition of interests was the enactment of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act in 1991. The Surface Transportation Policy Project (www.transact.org) played a critical role in convincing policy makers to widen the constituency involved in the legislative process. The result was a bill that placed greater emphasis on coordinated regional planning and took into account a range of environmental, public transportation, and community interests. The focus since then has been on building a coalition of interests broad enough to increase the monetary size of the bill. In the most recent reauthorization process, fiscal conservatives and ideologues

within the Republican Party fought to keep the funding level for SAFETEA-LU as low as possible, but pragmatic politics carried the day, and the final bill came in at over \$30 billion above what the administration had said it could accept.

Pragmatic politics also prevailed when pro-business and road-building interests attempted to use the SAFETEA-LU bill at its inception to gut the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). NEPA lays out a process to ensure that various environmental and community needs are consulted in the development of transportation projects that may impact environmental, historic, and community resources. Although Congress made some changes to the environmental review process, it failed to enact the sweeping changes first contemplated, thanks to pragmatic coalition politics.

Until a couple of years ago, low-income and environmental justice activists had not had experience working with key policy makers in Congress, particu-

Federal Money—Local Jobs

By Laura Barrett

The local hiring language in SAFETEA-LU was championed jointly by the Transportation Equity Network, the Gamaliel Foundation, Representatives Millender-McDonald and Costello, and Senators Bond and Obama. The new law directs the U.S. Department of Transportation to let communities create their own agreements around local and minority hiring. This allows communities to create local jobs by directly accessing the \$286 billion SAFETEA-LU funds. Benefits of Local Hiring Agreements:

- Local communities have more control over how their tax money is spent.
- Residents around highway and transit projects get access to the living wage jobs that these massive projects create.
- Welfare, jail, and other poverty-related costs to the community are reduced because more residents have living wage jobs.
- Job benefits are more equitably distributed throughout the region, rather than being concentrated in a few high-growth suburban corridors.
- The unemployed, underemployed, and people of color are given the opportunity to move into construction careers.

Community groups can pass their own local hiring ordinances on highway and transit money at the city council, county council, or state legislative levels. They should identify their best partners and create a strategy that moves toward a regional agreement.

Metropolitan Congregations United and United Congregations of Metro-East in St. Louis plan to have a local hiring ordinance for all public money passed in four counties and several cities surrounding St. Louis.

Continued on page 67

larly Republican committee chairs. Beginning in 2002, TEN developed a comprehensive agenda for renewal of the federal transportation bill, which entailed increasing resources for public transportation to address the needs of the transit-dependent, increasing public involvement in the transportation planning process, strengthening enforcement of environmental justice guidelines, and promoting economic development in low-income communities.

To push its agenda, TEN brought individuals directly affected by transportation policies to meet with their policy makers in person. A key turning point came when a high-level Republican staffer on the Senate Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee, which has jurisdiction over public transportation spending, agreed to weigh proposals that came before her against the interests of the grassroots leaders with whom she had begun to develop a relationship. A second major turning point came when grassroots and faith leaders in St. Louis, Missouri, extracted a commitment from a key Republican Senator on the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, which has jurisdiction over highways, to support local hiring on transportation projects.

What Remains to Be Done

Although victorious in some aspects of SAFETEA-LU, other elements of TEN's reauthorization agenda, such as strengthening enforcement of federal civil rights and environmental justice requirements in federal legislation, never gained traction in Congress, or for that matter, among the broader coalition of national allied constituencies. This was partly because of the nature of the congressional leadership in this

Congress and partly because progressive forces were focused on preventing major losses in environmental legislation and regulation. Most importantly, many in the civil rights and environmental justice communities were concerned with reversing the impact of the 2001 Supreme Court decision limiting the scope of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

While there will be much to do in the coming years to realize the victories that TEN accomplished in the reauthorization of the federal transportation bill, it is not too early to begin imagining what might be possible when the next reauthorization cycle comes in 2009.

Transportation is an issue that intersects a wide range of progressive causes—environmental protection, disability rights, civil rights, government accountability and transparency, sustainable economic development, smart growth, and rural access to services. The extent to which transportation planning and projects impact low-income and transit-dependent communities must be a key factor in all discussions, and work needs to be done to bring the various constituencies together under a common vision of environmental justice. With limited resources, grassroots groups were able to accomplish much with the enactment of SAFETEA-LU. Foundations and other financial supporters should give greater priority to transportation equity and put more resources into supporting organization and leadership development among affected communities. Finally, in national conversations about policies on poverty and the environment, transportation equity should be considered on a par with affordable housing and air quality. ■

Rich Stolz has worked at the Center for Community Change since 1997. He served as the staff coordinator of the Transportation Equity Network, a national coalition of grassroots organizations and allies that worked to influence mammoth federal transportation legislation in 1998 and 2005. Additional details on these reforms and other positive provisions of the bill can be found at www.communitychange.org/issues/transportation.

Continued from page 65

The groups had strong relationships with a few mayors and county executives, and decided to access those allies first, before taking on the state Department of Transportation. They also hope to get support from their Metropolitan Planning Organization, East West Gateway, which governs 13 counties. The groups are moving fast because pending highway projects, such as the new Mississippi River Bridge and the widening of Highway 40/64, are worth almost a billion dollars, which can translate to 47,000 potential jobs for local low-income, minority, and women residents.

“If we beef up our pre-apprenticeship programs now, and get our folks into training, we can build our workforce from our own communities. That’s important to local citizens who have been left out of our country’s economic boom, and to the 3,000 plus Katrina survivors who are with us now in the St. Louis area,” says Dr. Ron Trimmer, United Congregations board member. “We will work to ensure that highway and transit spending produce living wage jobs for our local citizens.”

Creating Local Hiring Agreements

While specific communities will have to negotiate their own terms with public officials, the following basics should be included:

- A clear indication of the type and size of funds involved, as per the agreement
- A firm definition of compliance
- Monitoring and enforcement protocols
- First source jobs programs
- Pre-apprentice, apprentice, and training programs
- Recruitment and outreach plans

What Other Groups Have Done

Gamaliel Foundation Affiliates: BRIDGE in Baltimore, Maryland, the New Jersey Regional Coalition, ARISE in Albany, New York, and MICA in Wisconsin, have all won community benefits agreements on particular development projects. Developers have agreed to hire a certain number of local residents and/or provide affordable housing as part of a housing development project. JOB in San Diego and Oakland Coalition of Congregations in California are currently working on similar campaigns.

Alameda Corridor Jobs Coalition (ACJC), Los Angeles, California: The Alameda Corridor Transportation Authority adopted the plan submitted by ACJC requiring that 30 percent of all work hours on the \$2.4 billion rail project be performed by residents of the affected low-income communities along the corridor. The agreement included a commitment of 1,000 training slots—650 for pre-apprenticeship construction trades training, and 350 for non-trades construction training—for low-income residents over the three-year life of the project.

Local Construction Employment Referral Program, Oakland, California: Created in 1993, when Oakland adopted its local hiring ordinance, the program requires all Oakland Redevelopment Agency projects and all City of Oakland construction projects of \$50,000 or more to hire Oakland residents for at least 50 percent of all work hours and for 50 percent of all new jobs. The program maintains a database of 2,637 workers and has placed 1,618 since July 1993. It is a local hiring policy that has effectively incorporated organized labor.

For more information contact Dr. Ron Trimmer, trimmer@charter.net or Laura Barrett, Metro Equity Dept., laurabarrett@gamallel.org

& the Race, Poverty Environment

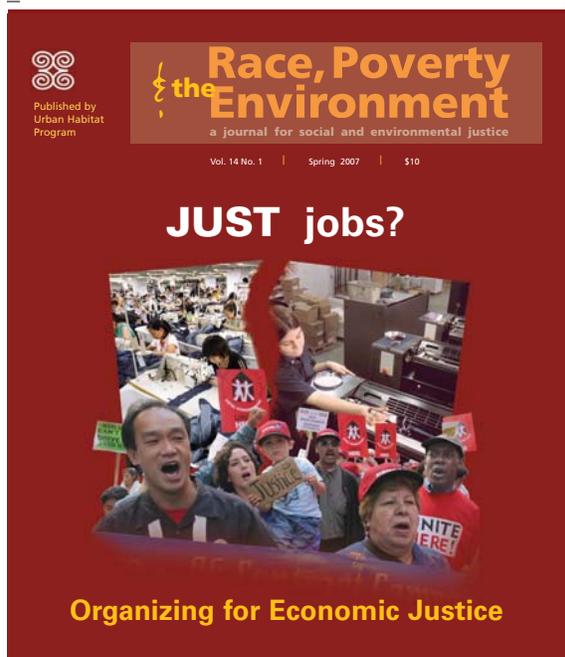
a journal for social and environmental justice



First published as a joint project of the Urban Habitat Program and the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, **RP&E** is now published twice annually by **Urban Habitat** and is dedicated to exploring the intersection of race, class, and environmental and social justice.

Don't miss any of our passionate, in-depth discussions of important social topics!

Support RP&E: subscribe today!



- Spring 1990 ▶ Earth Day
- Summer 1990 ▶ Cultural Diversity
- Winter 1991 ▶ Women of Color
- Spring 1991 ▶ Pesticides
- Summer 1991 ▶ Energy
- Winter 1992 ▶ The Summit
- Spring 1992 ▶ Asian/Pacific Islanders
- Summer 1992 ▶ Water
- Fall 1992 ▶ Native Nations in 1992
- Spring 1993 ▶ Urban Problems
- Summer 1993 ▶ Population and Immigration
- Fall 1993 ▶ Latinos and the Environment
- Spring 1994 ▶ Military Base Conversion
- Winter 1995 ▶ Environmental Justice and the Law
- Summer 1995 ▶ Nuclear Technology & Communities of Color
- Fall 1995 ▶ Social Justice and Transportation
- Spring 1996 ▶ Multicultural Environmental Education
- Fall 1996 ▶ The Border
- Winter 2000 ▶ A Place at the Table: Food & Environmental Justice
- Winter 2001 ▶ Reclaiming Land and Community: Brownfields & Environmental Justice
- Summer 2002 ▶ Fixin' to Stay: Anti-Displacement Policy Options & Community Response
- Summer 2003 ▶ Where Do We Go from Here? A Look at the Long Road to Environmental Justice
- Fall 2003 ▶ Governing from the Grassroots: EJ and Electoral Activism
- Summer 2004 ▶ Reclaiming our Resources: Imperialism and Environmental Justice
- Winter 2005 ▶ Burden of Proof: Using Research for Environmental Justice
- Winter 2006 ▶ Moving the Movement: Transportation Justice
- Summer 2006 ▶ Getting Ready for Change: Green Economics and Climate Justice

Use the form below or order online:
www.urbanhabitat.org/subscribe

Yes! I want an annual subscription to Race, Poverty & the Environment.
Sent free of charge to grassroots groups upon request.

\$20 (Individuals) \$40 (Institutions)

Yes! I want to support the advancement of social, economic, and environmental justice in the Bay Area and beyond.

I want to support Urban Habitat with a tax-deductible donation of:

\$25 \$50 \$100 \$500 \$1,000 Other \$ _____

Name: _____

Organization: _____

Address: _____

State: _____ Zip: _____ Email: _____

A check is enclosed Please charge my Visa/MasterCard

Visa/MC Number: _____ Exp. Date: _____

(Please include the 3-4 digit card verification number found on the back of most credit cards.)

Signature: _____

Please make checks payable to Urban Habitat. Mail this form to 436 14th St., #1205, Oakland, CA 94612