Making Transit Trustworthy & Accessible

State and city governments have long been working on making public transit more accessible and building a system that gets residents where they need to go without burdensome delays, transfers, or high fares. Boosting transit usage is also a key factor in achieving cleaner air, less congestion on roads, and stronger economies with more opportunities for mobility. However, it has been difficult to achieve these goals in an efficient way, and people of color have born a disproportionate burden of the inefficiencies created by a system that has prioritized automobile traffic. Now, as the country recovers from the coronavirus pandemic, the problem of transit has become more complicated: How can we restore trust in the safety of taking transit? How can we fund improvements in transit in a time of extreme budget pressure? And how do leaders ensure that policy decisions made now address the long-term inefficiencies and inequalities that have impeded people's mobility?

The COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing shutdown changed how Americans work and live, and by extension how they travel, which has had an unprecedented effect on transit usage. In May 2020, Bloomberg CityLab reported that many major metro area transit systems had seen 70 to 90 percent ridership losses since March, and research prepared for the American Public Transportation Association found that fare revenues were down nationally by 86 percent in April 2020 as compared to April 2019. TransitCenter estimated in April 2020 that transit agencies could face annual shortfalls of $26-40 billion. As states and cities reopen, riders are wary of returning to public transit, given the necessity of spending time inside a train car or bus with strangers with little room to socially distance - a poll conducted by Northstar found half of respondents were concerned with transit's safety in the context of the pandemic.

As governments work to find a new normal for transit, questions of access remain. Since long before the pandemic, transit agencies and governments have lacked good data and sufficient funding to efficiently link the people who most need affordable transportation to their jobs and other destinations. Meanwhile, as Transportation for America Director Beth Osborne told our Task Force, politics have complicated efforts to stop inefficient programs and projects, leaving fewer resources for the best approaches to transportation policy. Now, governments are working with even tighter budgets, but Americans under similar financial pressures need affordable methods of transportation to reach their jobs. Essential workers are uniquely reliant on transit, representing 36 percent of regular transit ridership, and are also far more likely to be vulnerable to the economic and health impacts of the pandemic: Black and Latino workers are overrepresented in essential industries according to the BLS' Current Population Survey 2019; and many essential workers are earning less than the country's median wage. When essential workers are transit-dependent, it makes our economies transit-dependent, even for those not personally riding transit. In addition, an economic downturn could mean fewer people able to afford driving cars. That would only increase dependence on transit, and hurt the recovery if people can't physically get to available jobs.

In the short term, state and local governments must restore trust in transit's safety. In the long term, as North Carolina Department of Transportation Chief Deputy Secretary David Howard emphasized to the Task Force, governments should prioritize improvements in transit that restore or create access for vulnerable neighborhoods and populations, and remember that poorly-designed infrastructure projects can divide communities or perpetuate long-standing inequities. Limited funds require more efficient route planning to maximize benefits, and the immediate post-pandemic move away from cars to more pedestrian-friendly streets is one opportunity to make a permanent change that could boost local economies and increase transit ridership.

- **Take the overall transportation system into account:** roadways and their design & placement; pedestrian access; bicycles, scooters, and other individual modes of transportation; buses; and trains.
  - ▷ Design or redesign transportation systems and roadways to benefit all types of users, not just vehicle users.
  - ▷ Ensure that planned roadways do not disconnect people from necessary transit options, like a highway that cuts off pedestrian and bike access to an otherwise convenient train station, and consider roadway updates or changes that re-establish access to existing transit.
  - ▷ Make dedicated space on roadways for buses.
  - ▷ Slow Streets and Vision Zero programs can make streets safer not just for pedestrians and alternative transportation, but also for transit.

- **Improve data collection** to measure not just movement and not just vehicles, but how people are using transit, and their access to work, businesses, and essential services.
  - ▷ Use data on transit use and infrastructure coupled with poverty or other indexes showing community inequity to map infrastructure needs and guide investment towards the neighborhoods that most need transit access.
  - ▷ Use GIS-based tools to evaluate transit effectiveness and how the system is connecting people to their jobs and services, looking at total time from front door to destination.

- **Consider transportation in concert with land use decisions**, and ensure that those decisions aren't creating barriers to transit goals or the types of transportation that residents prefer to use.
  - ▷ Residential and commercial construction should maximize travel via public transportation and walking/bike paths, cutting down on car trips and recognizing that highways cannot and should not be expanded indefinitely.
  - ▷ Prioritize collection and use of data about expected traffic impact when considering new residential and commercial development.

- **Collaborate on innovative solutions** to keep riders healthy and safe, and to make funding more effective by looking at transit needs across a metro area, county, or region:
  - ▷ States should also track any spread of COVID through mass transit, recognizing that a series of international studies have been "unable to tie any group of outbreaks to rail lines or city public transportation."
  - ▷ Use state or regional agencies to collect best practices from the area and help local systems implement solutions to effectively respond to COVID challenges.
  - ▷ Partner with local universities to understand developments in health protocols and learn about new tech solutions for making public spaces safe.
  - ▷ Work with other agencies and areas whose ridership or transit needs overlaps with your area to harmonize goals and make limited funding more effective.

- **Regain riders' trust by creating a visibly safer environment:**
  - ▷ Educate riders about safety measures and new expectations for riders, and provide help lines for updates or reports of noncompliance.
  - ▷ Consider ways to reduce contact and other exposure, like contactless pay for fares, clear curtains to separate areas or seats on buses and trains, and new ventilation systems.
  - ▷ Catch infections before they spread further by implementing low-cost instant result testing for transit staff, and contact tracing measures for riders where possible.

- **Prioritize equitable access**, as an easy means of connecting vulnerable communities to a wider array of jobs and economic opportunities with higher wages and pay.
  - ▷ Analyze transit and transportation metrics like vehicle ownership, commute times, cost burdens, job accessibility, and more through a lens of race and ethnicity. Research shows 60 percent of transit riders are people of color, and transit systems should guide investment to improve service for those communities, which have historically suffered from disconnection from city centers due to highways and other infrastructure.
  - ▷ Consider reducing or ending fares to restore low-income residents' ability to take transit in a time of increased financial instability.

- **Maximize impact of limited funding:**
  - ▷ Prioritize a high-quality line that connects the heart of the city and population, recognizing people will use less high-quality services to get to the high quality line. A hub and spoke system can be a good blend of train and buses: Light rail is extremely expensive up front but operation costs are $0.19 to the dollar versus bus operation.
  - ▷ Streamline bus routes - a bus that requires riders to walk a few blocks in exchange for a more direct and rapid route is more cost-effective for the city and more useful for riders than a slow bus that winds through a neighborhood.
  - ▷ Remember that not all transit projects are good - bad programs that aren't expanding access or making regular movement easier don't need to receive additional funding.
- **Support rural transit systems**, which often cannot recover from a shock like COVID's impact on travel:
  - ▷ Consider an on-demand service to balance transit needs with low ridership and high cost of operation.

Selected Examples from America's State and City Governments

Thinking about the transportation system as a whole:

- [Phoenix's Transportation 2050 plan](#), approved by voters in 2015 with support from t**hen-Mayor Greg Stanton and now-Mayor, then-Councilmember Kate Gallego,** charts an expanded investment in bus services and light rail, complemented by street changes to increase non-vehicle access. The plan aims to improve transportation for residents who drive, bike, walk, and ride transit, and by 2050 will add 75 miles of Bus Rapid Transit and 42 miles of light rail to provide riders with a premium transit service for faster and more reliable travel, among other goals.
- In 2019, **Shelby County, TN Mayor Lee Harris** established the county's first dedicated funding stream for public transit projects. Prior to the change, public transit was funded and administered by the City of Memphis, with no funding from Shelby County government. The new dedicated funding is approximately $1 million per year and can be used by the Memphis Area Transit Authority to pay for capital projects that improve air quality, mitigate congestion, or reduce wear-and-tear on infrastructure.

Prioritizing equity & access in transit:

- **Rochester, NY Mayor Lovely Warren** is overseeing a [transformation of the city's I-490 Inner Loop](#) that has severed neighborhoods from the city center and its economic growth. The project is removing the Inner Loop highway and replacing it with a boulevard, reconnecting neighborhoods and [replacing highway space with new housing and developments to anchor new growth.](#)
- **Kansas City, MO Mayor Quinton Lucas** is implementing a program to provide [zero fare transit service](#) for the metro area, a move expected to grow ridership by 20% in the next five years (pre-COVID projections). ZeroFare KC could save up to $2100 a year for a single parent using buses to get to work and get children to school, and a pre-COVID study showed it could improve the regional economy by $13-17.9 million. Research indicates that money saved on bus fare will go toward housing, medical expenses, retail, and insurance.
- **Richmond, VA Mayor Levar Stoney** established an [Office of Equitable Transit and Mobility](#) to look at the city's transit and mobility infrastructure as a whole and ensure it serves residents' multi-modal needs, while taking into account the need to improve service for historically-underserved populations. The office will rethink existing roads & infrastructure and guide design of future projects to benefit all types of transportation, and will also tackle projects like zero fares, Vision Zero safety work, and liaising with regional transportation agencies.
- **West Sacramento, CA Mayor Christopher Cabaldon** has partnered with Via since 2018 to offer [on-demand public transportation](#) to fill gaps in the transit system. This on-demand system has been especially important to fill the needs of senior citizens and others who struggle with mobility.

Collaborate to develop and implement innovative solutions:

- NC Transit Cares is a statewide initiative of **North Carolina's** Department of Transportation, intended to provide a platform to discuss problems facing the state's transit systems, identify successful local innovation strategies, and help local and regional agencies share and implement these ideas from other areas. Kicked off just before the shutdown prompted by the pandemic, the initiative quickly retooled to add COVID response as a key pillar of their work.

- During his time as a state representative, **Oregon Treasurer Tobias Read** championed a bill that paved the way for the West Coast Infrastructure Exchange, which allows Oregon, California, Washington, and British Columbia to plan, build, and finance public infrastructure through partnerships with each other and with others.

Rethinking streets:

- **Cleveland** began implementing dedicated bus lanes in existing roadways in 2008 to create a true bus rapid transit system, and saw a boom in ridership right away, with a 48 percent increase in the first year of operation. The investment is estimated to have a $114 return for every dollar invested, and has been credited with $6 billion in economic development.

- Due to decreased travel following the shutdown and the increased need for outdoor space for retail and restaurants, many cities have been experimenting with closing streets to create temporary plazas and walkable areas, which has helped many Americans see the value of streets beyond vehicle use. **New York City Councilmember Keith Powers** sponsored the legislation that paved the way for street dining in Manhattan.

Additional Resources

Transportation for America:
Maps & tools

American Public Transportation Association:
Research and technical resources

State Smart Transportation Initiative:
Resources on multimodal access for healthy
economies & sustainable, equitable communities

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