

Overcoming Roadblocks to Transportation Justice

By Jeff Hobson

Jobs out of reach, missed health appointments, no access to childcare, inability to attend night classes; these problems all stem from the same root: decades of transportation decisions made without adequately involving low-income families who use transit. There are four major roadblocks to transportation justice: excessive focus on congestion relief; emphasis on capital spending rather than improvements; focus on flashy new projects; inadequate community feedback mechanisms.

Focus on Congestion Relief

When elected officials and transportation agencies talk about a transportation crisis, they often mean increased traffic congestion on freeways. The big-ticket solutions that agencies propose—widening freeways, extending suburban commuter trains, even express buses—aim at relieving the burden of congestion for people commuting long distances from suburban homes to work. These commuters are more likely than not white, with incomes above average.

However, only one in four trips in the Bay Area involves commuting to work.¹ Most trips are for shopping, childcare, school, and other daily needs; they tend to be shorter and are more likely to occur outside peak commuting hours. The obstacles facing low-income families making these trips are a transportation crisis.

Emphasis on Capital Spending

Federal and state transportation funding often can be used only for capital expenses, such as new highway or rail projects. But often, urban low-income and people-of-color communities would rather see bus services that run more frequently and longer hours, and efforts such as sidewalk and pothole repair which are called “operations” or maintenance expenses.

Because of these restrictions community groups must seize every opportunity to define how *new* sources of money will be spent. It is also critical to hold agencies accountable and demand that they not

spend money on new projects until there is long-term funding available for their operation and maintenance.

Excessive Attention to Flashy Projects

When politicians set priorities for transportation money, they often choose flashy, news-making projects over cost-effective ones that give more value for every dollar spent. Agencies, too, overestimate benefits and underestimate costs of these mega-projects, and often lack the money to maintain them in the long term. In the Bay Area, two prime examples of this are the recently completed BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) extension to San Francisco International Airport and its proposed extension to San Jose. (See sidebar.)

This problem hurts low-income and people-of-color communities in two ways. First, these glamorous projects hog money that could provide better mass transit for more people. Second, when agencies run out of money to operate and maintain the new service, they tap into existing budgets, leading to fare hikes and service cuts to transit systems that serve the neediest communities.

Complexity Deters Participation

Too often, transportation agencies make policy and investment decisions without adequate involvement from low-income residents and people of color. The decision-making processes are complex, and the timelines long, with multiple agencies involved at



different points. A lack of understanding about how transportation decisions are made and by whom, is a significant barrier to participating effectively in the process. A central tenet of environmental justice is that government agencies must change their decision-making processes to involve the whole community. Community groups also have to increase their ability to understand, analyze, and affect transportation decisions.

Breaking Through the Roadblocks

While specific needs and obstacles will vary, the first step to winning transportation justice is to get your community organized and educated so you can focus on new money, advocate for cost-effectiveness, and demand mobility for all.

Focus on New Money

In the Bay Area, as in many major metropolitan areas, transportation consistently rates as a top concern.² These polls guarantee that elected officials will continue to propose billions of dollars in new transportation initiatives. Many of these initiatives require voter approval, so transportation agencies pay the most attention to community groups that can turn out the vote or grab media headlines. Also, new funding programs typically have fewer restrictions than existing ones, so communities have a better chance to influence the outcomes—such as more reliable transit services or safer streets for pedestrians and bicyclists.

Advocate for Cost-Effectiveness

Improvements to the existing transit systems, including many of the changes environmental justice communities call for the most, usually give “more bang for the buck” than the mega-projects often proposed by higher-income communities. Comparisons, such as “cost per new rider” or “cost per trip,” are most easily applied to the different ways to expand mass transit.

Of course, cost-effectiveness should go hand-in-hand with accessibility. For example, late-night and weekend transit is crucial for people who depend on public transit and should be made available, even if it isn't as cost-effective as commuter service. But in general, focusing on cost-effectiveness is a good way to make sure the needs of the environmental justice communities are fully met.

Demand Mobility for All

Although transportation planning usually focuses on congestion and long-distance commutes, many people, including more than a third of Bay Area residents, do not own or operate a vehicle.

It is a good strategy to use local statistics to enlighten agencies about how the needs of the low-income, disabled, children, and seniors are currently being underserved. Social service agencies have found that inadequate transportation is one of the top three barriers to the transition from welfare to work. Recently, Bay Area advocates, citing local transit-



related problems, won a \$216 million commitment for a “Lifeline Transportation” program whose funds can only be used to improve transportation services for low-income residents. The money is already being used to provide more frequent bus service and to support creative programs, such as childcare shuttles.

Winning a Bus Route—and Power—in North Richmond

In 1997, community leaders in North Richmond became concerned about the effects of welfare reform combined with poor transit access to jobs. Buses only served the edge of the neighborhood, ran infrequently, and stopped at 7 PM. Several community groups came together to demand changes from AC Transit, the local bus agency.

The result was a proposed new route to fill gaps in existing service. At first, AC Transit funded the service out of its budget surplus. Then the agency and community worked together to win long-term funding from other sources.

Who Wins, Who Loses: the BART-SFO Fiasco

Transportation powerbrokers were exuberant about a regional agreement in 1988 that promised to bring BART to the San Francisco International Airport. They confidently predicted high ridership on this eight-mile, \$1.7 billion extension. Transit officials even predicted that it would make money. SamTrans (the bus agency for San Mateo County) agreed to be financially responsible for operating the line.

However, the finished extension, which opened in 2003, cost 80 percent more than initial estimates, even accounting for higher costs due to inflation, and gets only about half the expected ridership.³ Today, SamTrans is faced with paying out millions from its operating budget each year and bus riders in San Mateo County are seeing higher fares and fewer buses.

Not only did North Richmond get a new bus route, the community also won political power. In 2000, Joe Wallace, a leader in the campaign for the new bus route, won election to the AC Transit Board of Directors.

Communities that organize for their own transportation needs can win! For other examples of winning strategies check out *Access Now! A Guide to Winning the Transportation Your Community Needs*, published by the Transportation and Land Use Coalition. The guide can help communities win 19 key transportation improvements and provides references to online resources, key publications, and other information. See www.transcoalition.org/access or call 510-740-3150 for more information. ■

Photos: Bus stops in East Oakland, © TALC.

Jeff Hobson is the Policy Director of the Transportation and Land Use Coalition.

1 Metropolitan Transportation Commission, 2000 Base Year Validation of Travel Demand Models, May 2004.

2 Bay Area Council's "Bay Area Poll", 1996-2004.

3 Based on final project costs contained in FTA, Annual Report on New Starts 2003, and original cost estimates contained in MTC's Resolution 1876.

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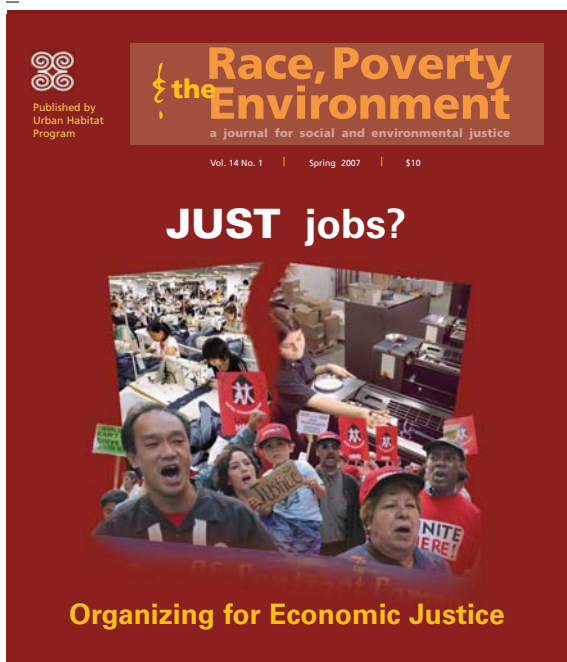
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