

# The Role of Transportation Planning and in Shaping Communities

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## Introduction

Far more than just laying pathways to get from one place to another, transportation infrastructure has played a fundamental role in shaping the physical, social, and economic landscape in cities and regions all around the nation. The convergence of rail lines in Chicago, for instance, primed the city to become a hub of trade and commerce, and established a framework for the geographic arrangement of industrial and residential development. The tangle of freeways in Los Angeles and the mass transit network in New York similarly influence the form and character of neighborhoods in those cities. By impacting development patterns and the cost and convenience of travel between locations, roads and transit services not only prescribe many of the options about where people live and work, but also determine access to opportunity.

## The Far-Reaching Impacts of Transportation Policy

For low- and moderate-income (LMI) and minority communities, though, the outcomes of transportation policy and planning over much of the past 50 years have been largely about isolation rather than access.

Arguably, in many places transportation policy and planning have served to exacerbate the challenges that the community development field seeks to confront, such as socioeconomic segregation and limited economic development opportunities. Consider the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, which authorized the interstate highway system and sparked the large-scale construction of roadways. This, along with the post-war boom and the rise of the automobile, accelerated and expanded the development of the suburbs. But the suburban migration that ensued left behind minority households in particular, who were unable to leave central cities for the suburbs due to discrimination in housing and mortgage markets. For example, exclusionary zoning practices and racially restrictive covenants barred minorities from living or purchasing property in newly developing suburban neighborhoods. And as late as the mid-1960s, minorities were largely unable to qualify for federally guaranteed mortgages, greatly limiting their ability to purchase new homes being built in the suburbs.<sup>1</sup>

Jobs and capital, however, did follow the mass suburban departure. Between 1963 and 1977, central city manufacturing employment in the 25 largest US cities dropped by 19 percent, while growing by 36 percent in the suburbs. Central city retail and wholesale employment also dropped during these years, while booming by 110 percent in the suburbs during this period.<sup>2</sup> For central city residents without cars, commutes to suburban jobs were near impossible since these areas were not well served—or not served at all—by public transportation. The exodus of retail outlets and office space to the sprawling suburbs also contributed to the decline of city tax bases, which affected funding levels for public infrastructure, including—critically—public schools. As these patterns led to diminishing investment in central city areas, LMI and minority residents' access to quality jobs, housing, education, food, and health care grew increasingly limited.

The development of the highway system affected LMI and minority communities in other ways as well. During the 1950s and '60s, freeways were commonly constructed through poor and minority neighborhoods.



Homes and businesses were razed to make way for high-speed roadways which often disconnected LMI communities from development taking shape on the urban fringes, while simultaneously eroding local economies. In California, for instance, the Cypress Freeway, completed in 1957 (and destroyed by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake), cut ethnically-mixed West Oakland off from downtown Oakland, uprooting families and businesses and subjecting the remaining community to high volumes of traffic overhead.<sup>3</sup> This kind of proximity to expressways disproportionately exposed neighborhood residents to noise and air pollutants emanating from vehicles. Health in many LMI and minority communities was thus compromised; epidemiological studies have consistently demonstrated that proximity to freeways significantly increases the incidence and severity of asthma and other respiratory diseases, diminishes lung capacity and function, and is related to poor birth outcomes, childhood cancer, and increased mortality risks.<sup>4</sup>

Demographic patterns have shifted gradually over time, with mobility increasing for all racial, ethnic and income groups. Still, many cities continue to face the challenges that were spurred or aggravated by past transportation decisions. Residential segregation, neighborhood disinvestment, and unemployment remain dominant features of many, if not most, central cities. LMI and minority communities continue to be disproportionately exposed to air pollution and other externalities of roadways – in California, for instance, minority children are three times as likely as their white counterparts to live in areas with high traffic density.<sup>5</sup> Much of the work of the community development field over the past several decades has been geared toward mitigating the economic, social, and health outcomes of geographic isolation caused by poor transportation planning decisions, and reducing the spatial mismatch between where LMI households live and the jobs and other amenities that make up healthy neighborhoods.

In addition to the social costs of suburban expansion, the economic and environmental costs of auto-oriented transportation planning have also grown. Roadway capacity has been exceeded in many places, leading to severe road congestion. Commuting times and costs have thus risen; workers in all major metropolitan areas are increasingly traveling 45 minutes or more to their places of employment, and fuel prices have doubled, on average, since the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> Sprawl has also increased the cost of public service provision, with per-capita costs for services like sewerage, trash collection, and police and fire protection all rising with decreased population density.<sup>7</sup> Concerns about the environmental and political costs exacted by sprawl and reliance on automobiles—including dependence on fossil fuels, greenhouse gas emissions, the loss of open space and pressures on fragile ecosystems—have gained voice.

## Rethinking Development Patterns for the Future

Accordingly, over the past decade or so, urban planners and developers have increasingly begun to reformulate land-use plans to take the economic and environmental costs of auto-oriented sprawl into account and to rethink urban development patterns. “Smart Growth” and “New Urbanism” emerged as planning buzzwords, and “transit oriented developments” (TODs), which promote re-densification, walkability, and transit use via the concentration of housing and retail around transit nodes, have cropped up in cities around the nation. Demand for public transit has also increased, with ridership growing by nearly 40 percent since the mid-90s, far outpacing population growth and increase of vehicle miles traveled on highways.<sup>8</sup> New planning theory, coupled with consumer demand for public transit, has brought greater attention to how transportation planning decisions fit into the design of healthy communities.

These trends have led policymakers to work toward more systematic changes that aim to address transportation needs in tandem with housing policy and environmental protection. In California, for instance, legislation known as SB375 was passed in 2006 that requires Metropolitan Planning Organizations, which encompass the majority of California counties and residents, to set a target for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and to develop a “Sustainable Communities Strategy” (SCS) to show how they will meet their targets. These growth strategies must align long-range regional housing and transportation planning to increase the density of residential and mixed-use development near transit facilities, and thereby cut down on vehicle miles traveled and reduce greenhouse gas emissions from vehicles. Decisions about the allocation of transportation funds must be consistent with the SCS of a given region, and residential projects that are consistent with a region’s SCS will be eligible for streamlined California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) processing – a significant incentive in light of the time and expense that this mandated environmental review can add to the development of a project.

At the federal level, an unprecedented partnership between the Department of Transportation, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Environmental Protection Agency has been established to “help families in all communities – rural, suburban, and urban—gain better access to affordable housing, more transportation options, and lower transportation costs, while protecting the environment in communities nationwide.” Guided by principles that consider energy-efficiency, community revitalization and equity, and economic opportunity, the Partnership for Sustainable Communities is designed to encourage communities to reorient their

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planning strategies. In June, HUD announced a competitive \$100 million Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant Program that will support regional, multi-sector planning efforts that integrate housing, land use, economic and workforce development, transportation, and infrastructure investments. Applications will be reviewed by all Partnership agencies, with grants supporting plans that align investments in a manner that takes into account the tangled economic, health, environmental, and social equity challenges facing a given region.

Emerging policy measures are thus emphasizing environmental sustainability, while transportation and land-use plans—though not traditionally employed to address social equity issues—are increasingly recognized as having significant roles to play in connecting LMI and minority communities to improved opportunities. This momentum to weave together the concerns of community and environmental health with transportation planning has prompted considerable dialogue amongst a range of stakeholders as to how to further promote these ends. The consensus seems to be that there is still a great deal of work to do to ensure that, going forward, the needs of LMI and minority communities will have due weight in decision-making and that these communities will share equally in the benefits promised by emergent approaches to development.

## An Exploration of Equitable TOD and Community Development

The articles in this issue of *Community Investments* delve into questions surrounding TOD in particular, which has the potential to generate a host of benefits for low-income communities. However, TOD has not necessarily had equitable impacts in its applications to date. Affordable, family-friendly housing has not consistently been incorporated into TOD projects, which have in some cases priced-out and displaced low-income communities. LMI communities have also not necessarily been full participants in planning processes surrounding TODs. Additionally, the type of transit that composes the T in TOD is often fixed-guideway—for example, high speed trains or light rails—which is both expensive to build and primarily serves the needs of commuters traveling during peak hours. Low-income workers, in contrast, often work off-peak shifts or multiple jobs in multiple locations. The

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tradeoffs that transit agencies must make in financing rail projects can mean service cutbacks for bus networks that enable those without cars to navigate daily needs. This is particularly problematic in areas where bus networks already offer infrequent or unreliable service.

The articles that follow explore some of these issues, and offer suggestions about how to more intentionally include the needs of LMI communities in planning and executing TODs. This will not be an easy task. Planning, financing, and constructing equitable TOD is even more complex than average TOD projects, which, with their zoning hurdles, land assembly issues, and atypical configurations of commercial, office, residential, and parking space, are themselves more challenging than conventional greenfield developments. The financial straits of both the public and private sectors inject critical questions of how to pay for the elements that ensure equity and inclusion. Transit agencies throughout the nation are facing budget crises, which have led to deferred maintenance, fare hikes, and service cutbacks and that are already disproportionately impacting the low-income and minority communities who comprise the majority of transit users in urban areas.<sup>9</sup> For lenders and investors, the complexity surrounding TOD projects can lead to a perception that they are overly risky deals.

However, foundations and CRA-motivated financial institutions have an important role to play in funding TODs, and thereby enabling affordable housing to be preserved nearby or developed as part of these projects. TOD funds are springing up in a number of cities across the US, and may prove to be an effective model for leveraging public and private capital to support affordable housing development near transit. Denver's TOD Fund, which has attracted investors including the City of Denver, the MacArthur

Foundation, Colorado Housing and Finance Authority, Enterprise Community Partners, the Urban Land Conservancy, U.S. Bank and Wells Fargo, is poised to enable the preservation and construction of affordable housing units within one half mile of existing and new rail service and a quarter mile of frequent bus routes (for more on the Denver TOD Fund, see "Equipping Communities to Achieve Equitable Transit-Oriented Development" in this issue). Here in California, the newly established Bay Area Affordable Transit-Oriented Development fund will operate as a revolving loan pool for land acquisition for affordable housing development in certain locations near rail and bus lines. The Fund has received a commitment of up to \$10 million from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, and is expected to attract matching commitments from foundations, investors, and commercial lenders.<sup>10</sup>

TODs are not, of course, a panacea. But the impetus to account for equity and inclusion in their planning and execution is emblematic of the need to broadly recalibrate investment decisions related to transportation and housing. The recent spate of financial, environmental, and public health and safety crises are linked at least in part to the historical neglect of sustainability and inclusion in development planning. The Gulf Oil disaster is easy to point to in arguing not just for movement away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy, but also away from transportation policy and development patterns that feed our demand for fuel. Aspects of the foreclosure crisis, too, support this argument. "Drive till you qualify" mortgages, which enabled LMI borrowers to trade distance from city centers for affordability, have fallen into foreclosure at high rates, ultimately untenable in part because they did not take transportation costs, among other expenses, into account.

Equitable TOD is one model to pursue in increasing the density of urban areas while preserving affordability and enhancing access for LMI households to employment, education, and other opportunities. Additional transportation and development policy choices that similarly account not just for environmental concerns, but also for costs and benefits across the socioeconomic spectrum, can go far in providing a sustainable platform for economic growth in the future, and in remedying some of the inequities that challenge communities both here in the 12th District and around the nation. **CI**

# Endnotes

## The Role of Transportation Planning and Policy in Shaping Communities

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## Weaving Together Vibrant Communities through Transit-Oriented Development

1. Multi-modal refers to the existence of different transportation modes that are coordinated with one another to help people reach desired destinations in the most efficient way possible. A robust transportation network would include integrated options for walking, biking, driving and taking transit, which might include buses, bus-rapid transit, light rail, and/or commuter rail.
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