Social Equity in Transportation Planning

A Community-Based Framework

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As the transportation planning world awaits the U.S. Department of Transportation's issuance of new performance measures, progressive planners have reason to be more focused than ever on how to measure equity. Both planners and advocates need methods and metrics that will help identify the transportation investments most likely to move the needle on the challenges of segregation, exclusion from opportunity and extreme inequality that confront low-income communities of color – challenges that also threaten the economic and environmental sustainability of metropolitan regions as a whole.

In this timely discussion, the central role of low-income residents themselves is too often overlooked. The framework currently used by metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) to assess equity in their long-range regional transportation plans treats those residents as bystanders with little to contribute to the discussion about the future of their communities. What's more, equity analyses under the current framework almost never lead to changes in the investments proposed. Until that framework is replaced, the problem of identifying and addressing structural inequities will remain insoluble.

We offer a new approach here that puts residents of underserved communities at the center of the equity discussion. Before sketching the elements of the new approach, we briefly review the main components of the current framework, which starts with the wrong questions about equity. When the analysis begins with the right questions, the central role of underserved community residents in answering those questions becomes clear. In light of the collective wisdom we find in community deliberation over unmet needs and solutions, we consider how agency planners can best support residents in unlocking their collective wisdom.

The Current Framework

The current state of the art in MPO equity analysis assumes that "social equity" can be adequately operationalized using quantitative metrics produced by travel demand forecasting models. A very common one involves calculating how many jobs future residents of the communities inhabited today by low-income people of color will be able to reach in 30 minutes by transit or auto compared to the residents of other communities.

That metric is more or less arbitrary. It is rare that low-income residents ask their MPO to answer that particular question. But even if it were a burning one in an underserved community today, the answer the models give is not remotely relevant to today's needs. There are three major reasons, each related to the fact that MPO modeling focuses on the "horizon year" of the long-range plan, 20-plus-years in the future.

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First, since modelers cannot forecast the movement of populations of color, they simply assume those populations will be concentrated in 20 years' time in the same communities where they live today. That is simply fiction. In the 20 years since 1990, for instance, Oakland and San Francisco lost 84,000 African-American residents. MPOs, in short, are using a "color-blind" methodology to certify their compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act.

Second, and equally fictitious, the forecasting model assumes that 20 years' worth of transportation investments will be made as set out in the newest update of the long-range plan. But that plan is superseded by a new one every four years and can change dramatically (particularly in its outer years) from one update to the next. Focusing attention on a near-term planning horizon would be much more meaningful.

Finally, this approach does not identify *current* inequities – segregation, exclusion from opportunity, displacement, and so on – at all. As a result of ignoring present conditions, the models fail to identify key investment strategies that could be tailored to actually *address* those challenges.

Starting with the Right Question

In sum, the current framework is broken. Replacing it starts with identifying the right question. Surprisingly, that question is not "what is equity?" This abstract framing invites imprecision and malleability, and is incapable of guiding investment policy. A much more specific question is needed, one that can be more concretely and rigorously operationalized. That question is: What are the most pressing unmet needs of particular underserved communities?

Starting with the current needs opens up a practical equity inquiry: whether and how well a proposed project or investment package will address those needs. It allows the question to be asked in real time, when it can be addressed in today's communities with today's dollars, rather than with misleading promises of future investment. It also tracks an important component of U.S. DOT's environmental justice order, which prohibits not only the outright denial of benefits to low-income communities of color, but also any "significant delay" in their receipt of those benefits.

If we start by identifying today's priority unmet community needs, tailoring appropriate metrics becomes much simpler and more meaningful. Four questions must be asked about a specific project or plan to determine its performance in advancing equity:

1. Does it meet an important need identified by a disadvantaged community?
2. Are the benefits associated with it significant, rather than incidental?
3. Are those benefits targeted to low-income residents?
4. Does it avoid substantial harms to the community?

This framework has been largely operationalized in state guidance recently adopted by the California Air Resources Board (CARB). CARB's guidance implements a statutory requirement that the state direct at least 25 percent of its carbon "cap-and-trade" auction revenues to benefit disadvantaged communities. With auction revenues exceeding $2 billion a year and rising, much was at stake in defining specifically what is meant by a "benefit." CARB's guidance requires investments to "address an important need" identified by disadvantaged community residents; prioritizing those that will provide "most significant benefits" to those residents; and requiring that "projects be designed to avoid substantial burdens, such as displacement . . . or increased exposure to toxics or other health risks."

Answering these four questions in an action-oriented manner also has national precedent in HUD's newly-published regulation on "affirmatively furthering fair housing." Under the HUD rule, local governments that receive HUD funds must prepare an Assessment of Fair Housing that:

- identifies, with robust community engagement, the critical equity gaps that exist within the jurisdiction today, utilizing data HUD provides and other relevant regional data;
- identifies key contributing factors of the gaps identified;
- prioritizes the most significant contributing factors

and sets goals that will meaningfully address the high priority factors, with "metrics and milestones" for each goal;

- tailors near-term actions and investments consistent with those goals; and
- measures progress over the near term.

This rule offers a methodology that MPOs can and should adapt in their equity analyses.

A Community-Centered Equity Framework

HUD's emphasis on robust community engagement hints at an important feature of the four questions posed above: the expertise needed to answer them lies not in the hands of agency planners and modelers, but in community residents themselves. They live at the intersection of a whole range of "issue silos" – unaffordable housing and rising rents, inadequate and costly transit service, an unhealthy urban environment, and poor economic prospects – and see firsthand the cumulative impacts on the lives of their families and neighbors. Unfortunately, agency planners are rarely well-situated to learn from residents' expertise. They are often not known to the community, much less are they trusted by residents who have not forgotten the ravages of urban renewal and the federal withdrawal from cities.

The challenge, then, is how to engage the collective wisdom of community residents in the process of identifying metrics that correlate well with their priority concerns, and that are capable both of comparing alternative investment approaches and of measuring progress year by year. There are two issues underlying this challenge: first, do community residents really hold that wisdom? And second, under what conditions can they divulge it?

Several recent community-based planning experiences illustrate that communities do hold great wisdom. In Los Angeles, a coalition of advocacy and legal organizations developed "Community Alternative 7" to a proposed plan for the expansion of Interstate 710 near the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. Demonstrating a keen sense of fundamental traffic engineering principles, the community-designed alternative would meet the project's stated needs without placing additional burdens on the health of nearby residents.

In Oakland, Eastlake United for Justice, a group of low-income neighbors, joined together to block a city plan to sell a surplus parcel to a luxury condominium developer. The group then worked with pro bono architects to design a community proposal for a 100% affordable housing development that it submitted in response to the city's request for proposals. And in the greater San Francisco Bay Area, community residents and advocates came together across issue areas – affordable housing, effective transit, anti-displacement and health – to propose a community-defined alternative regional transportation plan. They proposed to locate new affordable housing close to low-wage jobs, keep existing low-income residents in their homes, and increase investments in local transit service. Their alternative lived up to its name – the Equity, Environment, and Jobs (EEJ) scenario – by outperforming the agency's preferred plan on a broad range of regional goals. Indeed, the agency analysis found it was the "environmentally superior alternative."

These are just a few recent examples demonstrating that the collective wisdom of communities can trump the expertise of planning professionals. In each of these efforts, the official process did not adequately welcome community members to contribute their unique knowledge. Instead, echoing the past, planners and engineers had decided in advance the alternatives that would be acceptable and then presented those to the communities, creating needless antagonism and distrust.

If engaged communities can offer real solutions, how can planning agencies proactively tap into that community expertise? As these examples show, authentic community engagement is rarely due to the initiative of agency planners. On the contrary, where public engagement succeeds, it is because residents have come together to influence decisions that affect them. To support that engagement, agencies should focus on building bridges to community membership groups. Those groups are trusted by residents, who vote their confidence with the time they make in their busy lives to volunteer as members.

One role MPOs can play to spur authentic community engagement is to focus on incentives to participate. When residents can envision a real opportunity to affect outcomes in the near term, in the form of investments or policies that address their priorities, they are much more likely to make time to engage. That lesson comes most recently from the availability of billions of dollars in cap-and-trade revenues to be distributed in local grants from California's Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund. Seeing the upside of participating, dozens of community groups across the state have engaged to shape those local investments.

Agencies should also provide resources to organizations trusted in the community – especially membership organizations – to run their own authentic planning processes. In California's San Joaquin Valley, the Council of Fresno County Governments provided grants to community organizations to facilitate their participation in the development of the most recent regional plan. Nationally, the tri-agency Partnership for Sustainable Communities made planning grants to MPOs that agreed to provide resources to community groups. With the community in the driver's seat, agency planners can then provide technical support and analysis.

A new framework for transportation decision-making

Community-centered planning is at the heart of the solution to the problem of equity metrics in transportation. With appropriate incentives and resources, underserved communities can deliberate effectively to identify their priority needs. When the planning process follows the community's lead, equity analysis schemes that model distant outcomes against arbitrary metrics fall away. Instead, planners can conduct an equity analysis that focuses on the near term, using metrics tailored to the needs the community identifies.

This new framework is undergirded by the realization that residents of underserved communities are the experts in understanding what they need. Implementing it could be the first step towards meaningfully redressing past inequities, while also promoting the welfare of the greater region as a whole.