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## Broadening the Transportation Equity Lens

*Cities are investing in mobility resources and services to restore community values and deliver vital projects*

Equitable planning is taking center stage in how we shape our communities, provide essential services and move people. Cities across the U.S. are refocusing how mobility resources are planned and implemented to create long-standing and far-reaching opportunities that align with their values and goals. To assist communities, the transportation planning and engineering industry is carrying out projects with a focus on fostering an inclusive, meaningful process about what, where and how mobility can improve access and connectivity to jobs, goods, essential services and loved ones.

### What is Equitable Transportation?

Transportation equity ensures that everyone has access to resources for their needs, and that benefits (and costs) are distributed fairly and appropriately across communities. Equity is not about treating everyone the same. It is about developing mobility plans, projects and programs that deliberately invest in communities, so individuals and groups receive treatment or resources based on their individual needs or assets. It is a concerted effort to address unique transportation needs to provide the greatest level of access and connectivity needed for a community to thrive.

### Time to Refocus: Tools of Transportation Equity

Transportation professionals play an important role in achieving equity-based solutions that maximize inclusivity, diversity and equity before a plan is approved or project hits the ground.

While various methods exist, the fundamental actions needed to prioritize transportation equity focus on:

1. Continuing to engage community members at every stage of a mobility project's life cycle.
2. Innovating new ways different than traditional processes in order to increase access and opportunity to transportation, jobs, goods and essential needs.
3. Respecting and understanding community needs, unmet demands and past planning efforts (e.g., shelved projects).

4. Focusing investments in communities that have historically been disenfranchised and often excluded/disconnected.

### The New and Foreseeable Normal: Equitable Transportation Trends

Equitable planning that reimagines our mobility networks and services increasingly looks like this:

**The Neighborhood Center + Neighborhood Commute.** There is a growing trend among transportation professionals that the future of cities will be redefined by its origins: the neighborhood.

Before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the idea of the "15-minute city" gained needed attention. It allowed city officials to address "food deserts," mobility service improvements and infrastructure at a microlevel, and provide more public space and advance other civic-minded initiatives. These efforts are paving the way to more community inclusivity and redesigned mobility systems.

The mindset is shifting from thinking about the commuter to thinking about the resident, and to ensure that cities are serving the needs of residents in their neighborhoods. The future of transportation includes providing more mobility choices while creating resilient land-use policies that transform streets for more public activity, exercise, and local commerce. New policies geared towards equitable Transit Oriented Development (TOD), establishing equity performance metrics and redesigning transit networks into grid-like, neighborhood systems are popping up in Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Indianapolis — to name a few.



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**Shared Streets: Health Equity.** A street that prioritizes pedestrians and treats vehicles as guests is essentially a shared street. Cities have transformed streets into active spaces for decades. Now the focus is shifting toward purposefully redesigning streets to create greater opportunity for health and exercise in vastly underserved communities. This might include, for example, closing select streets to vehicle traffic to provide residents with long-term benefits of additional street spaces for walking and biking. New York, Denver, Chicago, Oakland, Seattle, and Minneapolis have rapidly deployed shared street pilots in disadvantaged neighborhoods and areas historically stricken with “food deserts,” limited retail and access to parks and open space.

**Transit: Pushing the Equity Envelope.** Providing ways to reduce financial burdens on low-income transit riders and making transit more attractive to all community members is nothing new, but efforts to completely rethink how the transit business works — putting customers first — is taking shape. An increasing number of agencies are going fare-free or considering it, if the funding equation pencils out. When it comes to attracting new riders, fare-free or subsidized programs will be a mainstay. Key equity trends for transit agencies include:

- Requiring equity strategies that prioritize high-quality transit investments for highest-need populations.
- Establishment of equity performance metrics that align with community values.
- Enacting progressive fare policies to make transit free or significantly subsidized for low-income populations or considering dynamic pricing (e.g., income-based fares).
- Creating innovative funding sources that better contribute transit resources to people in greater need.
- Decriminalizing fare evasion and ensuring proper training of transit staff.
- Building trust by pushing for more public input and transparency of service information, planning and development.

From King County (Washington) and Austin to Kansas City and Lawrence, MA (one of the poorest communities in the state), progressive measures have been taken to make equity a key component in agency decision-making.

**Shared Mobility + Equity Assessment.** Shared mobility, such as bikeshare (pedal and electric), e-scooters and other shared modes have dramatically increased due to expanded programs, ease of access and allowing for greater social distancing.

Cities have taken a strong stance in advancing micromobility programs to ensure that equity goals and objectives are being met. Key measures include:

- Removing fleet-size restrictions to companies who provide service in low-income neighborhoods or places with limited transportation options.

- Establishing performance metrics intended to show a clear connection between operator standards and equitable practices.
- Reduced or completely free start-up memberships (the latter for critical healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic) and significantly reduced trip fares.
- Advanced street design and safety standards, and regulations that account for multi-user facilities for standard bikes, shared micromobility, and pedestrians.

While micromobility programs’ performance is being assessed, cities and transit agencies are continuously testing equitable performance metrics. The survival of these services largely relies on creating more affordable, accessible options to a larger customer base, and specifically in predominantly underserved areas.

**Emerging Mobility & Design Thinking.** Transportation technology is constantly evolving, better linking people to mobility and information in a matter of seconds. The future of mobility is largely dependent on how public and private interests will gel and how mobility service providers will effectively support community value-building.

While the equity balance between mobility and technology is still uneven, cities are requiring private enterprises to foster greater public access and opportunity. “Design thinking” approaches, which adopt hands-on, tailored methods to concept development, piloting and implementation, intentionally designed to meet the needs of a specific population, are refining how technology can support equitable planning and development.

In addition to ensuring that new mobility does not leave anyone behind, there are efforts spanning the U.S. to safeguard users from inequitable business practices and hold private mobility service providers to higher standards. Contemporary examples can be found in Seattle, Cambridge (MA), and Miami-Dade County in Florida.

### **Moving the Equity Conversation Forward**

As transportation professionals, we understand that both public and private sectors will continue to bear substantial costs to repair systemic issues facing our mobility systems. No single department or agency can address and solve for equity. It will continue to take a collective effort. Elevating the voices of community groups and exploring innovative measures to increase access to transportation and opportunity are steps toward creating mobility systems that achieve larger community goals and allow people of all walks of life to thrive. ■

**Equity Prioritization Toolkit.** Cities and MPOs across the U.S. are developing equity toolkits. Blending quantitative analysis, illustrative maps and a transparent platform, equity prioritization toolkits provide information about where, how and why public dollars are spent. These toolkits establish a direct nexus between equitable investments and capital improvement programs, ultimately keeping the public informed at all times.