

Transit Justice Principles

Statement of purpose

Abundant transit unlocks freedom of movement. When people can count on the bus or train to get where they need to go, they can easily access jobs, education, medical care, culture, goods and services, and the daily life of their communities. They benefit from greater economic mobility and lower household costs. Transportation systems that maximize people's access to good transit are necessarily inclusive, without barriers linked to race, income, age, or ability. And because transit is resource-efficient and supports low-emissions neighborhoods, it's also an indispensable tool to prevent climate change, clean our air, and protect public health.

But good transit is very scarce in the U.S. today. Highway networks in our metro regions were built to facilitate white flight from cities in the mid-20th century, making full inclusion in the economy contingent on personal car ownership -- and feeding fossil fuel industry profits in the process. As a result, our transportation systems perpetuate racial and income inequality, limit economic opportunity, hasten catastrophic climate change, and exacerbate chronic disease.

Without swift action, the COVID-19 pandemic will further weaken transit networks and make the inequities and pollution of a car-centric system even worse. Transit agencies face a fiscal crisis that threatens to devastate bus and train service millions of Americans rely on. Only if public officials move quickly to place transit on strong footing can our transportation systems propel American cities and towns toward a just, sustainable economic recovery. To meet this moment, policy at the federal, state, and local level must be overhauled to deliver better transit.

Americans need transit that is...

Equitable. America's car-based transportation system erects barriers to mobility that reinforce long-term social inequities. Transit investment must remove these barriers and prioritize the needs of Black, brown, and low-income people who stand to gain the most from better service.

Sustainable. To avert severe climate change, models consistently show that some car trips must shift to transit. Transit investment must expand access to good bus and train service so transit ridership increases as a share of total travel.

Economically productive. Better transit expands worker access to jobs, employer access to the workforce, customer access to businesses, and business access to a customer base. Transit investment must make service more abundant, frequent, fast, and reliable to increase economic opportunity and productivity. Investing in better transit should also generate more good-paying jobs operating, maintaining, and supplying transit systems.

Safe and accessible. Many factors in addition to scarce service limit access to transit, including dangerous streets, discriminatory policing, and the lack of elevators at stations. Transit investment should eliminate the full range of limitations and achieve broad-based safety and universal access.

Affordable. Access to transit should never be contingent on one's ability to pay. Transit investment should establish programs that provide fare relief for everyone who needs it.

Outline of policy recommendations

Local policies (relevant to transit agencies, city and metro region governments)

- Dramatically increase the amount of transit service, so many more people and jobs are within walking distance of bus or train routes that arrive frequently all day, every day. Quickly adding service on bus routes that remain heavily used during the COVID-19 pandemic will also help reduce crowding and improve public health.
- Enact new sources of transit funding that minimize revenue volatility and stabilize operating budgets.
- Redesign bus networks so more people can reach more places in less time, prioritizing travel needs of communities of color and low-income neighborhoods. Expand frequent service in response to changing residential and employment patterns.
- Enable riders to bypass traffic congestion by implementing comprehensive networks of bus-only lanes on major routes.
- Improve pedestrian and bicycle connections to transit stops and stations, and add shelters and other amenities at bus stops.
- Add station elevators and other features to make existing and new transit infrastructure universally accessible.
- Reform commuter rail operations and fares to make service useful and affordable to lower-income riders who've been excluded by the 9-to-5 suburban service model.
- Implement safety policies that look beyond policing so women, people of color, and other vulnerable communities feel free from the threat of violence and harassment.
- Structure fares to make transit affordable for everyone, including discounts or free passes for people with low incomes, seniors, students, and kids.
- Increase presence of transit riders, women, Black and brown people, people with disabilities, and other under-represented groups on agency governing boards.
- Avoid public spending on venture-backed initiatives like micro-mobility, autonomous vehicles, or Hyperloop-style gimmicks.
- Prioritize maintenance and utilitarian upgrades of existing transit infrastructure above aesthetically-driven projects or high-cost capital expansions.
- When major capacity expansion projects are built, implement them in places with high concentrations of people and jobs, where the most people will benefit, not where the smallest number will object.
- Control capital costs so maintenance, upgrades, and expansions can be carried out at prices that enable work at an ambitious scale, on a rapid timetable.

State policies

- Flex more federal funds to transit agencies instead of highways.
- Ramp up investment in pedestrian safety along major transit routes on state roads.
- Eliminate red tape for converting right-of-way on state roads to transit-only lanes.
- Classify transit workers as essential workers, entitled to PPE, leave, and other necessary benefits.
- Comprehensively analyze impacts of new transportation technologies on existing workers, including workers who may be deskilled, required to learn new skills, or fully displaced.
- Create more seats for transportation labor on new technology-related working groups.

Federal policies

- Achieve funding parity between the highway program and the transit program.
- Overhaul the federal highway program to reduce carbon emissions, prioritize road maintenance over expansion, and induce state DOTs to improve pedestrian and bike connections to transit.
- Within the transit program, launch a major new initiative to fund transit operations, contingent on local agencies using funds to expand service.
- Significantly enlarge transit capital grant programs. Prioritize maintenance, retrofitting systems for accessibility, and upgrades and expansions that benefit the most riders.
- Align incentives within all federal transit grant programs to reward agencies that increase overall ridership and improve service for Black and brown residents.
- Create a program modeled on SNAP benefits to dramatically expand fare relief.
- Identify causes of high transit construction costs and systematically promote practices to bring costs down.
- Stronger transparency and public feedback mechanisms for federal rules regarding autonomous technologies, including mandatory plans for when and where the new product or service would be phased into operations and for formal procurement.