



Actualizing Equity 2020

From Reduced Schedules to Essential Service Advancing Transit Equity

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into the spotlight the role of “essential” workers — who are disproportionately low-wealth, immigrant and communities of color — and revealed the racialized and ableist gaps in the essential services those workers need to protect their health and meet their daily needs — including safe, reliable public transit. At our **April 2020 Actualizing Equity event**, we explored: how do we proactively combat the current and coming attacks on our already dramatically under-funded and inequitable transit system while also boldly asserting the sweeping changes necessary to prioritize the needs of essential workers, people with disabilities and communities of color not just now, but far beyond this current crisis?

Speakers included

- » Amity Foster, Twin Cities Transit Riders Union
- » Charles Frempong-Longdon, Sierra Club North Star Chapter
- » Finn McGarrity, Move Minnesota
- » Martin Hernandez, West Side Community Organization, formerly of LA Bus Riders Union
- » Nikki Villavicencio, disability rights activist and ADAPT member

Values

Transit riders are essential members of our communities.

Dignity, respect and access to a full and vibrant life must be independent of access to an automobile.

Transit is critical infrastructure.

Our economies and our communities rely on the people — disproportionately communities of color — who rely on public transit. It is a fundamental piece of our society and must be resourced as such.

Transit is not a business; it's a public service.

Like the fire department or school system, we cannot expect our trains and buses to make a profit or for users to pay a significant portion of the cost.

Transit is more than transportation; it's a community.

As transit riders, we find joy, connection and empathy from the human interaction on buses and trains.

Vision

A transit system that is accessible to all.

Everyone, regardless of income or physical ability, has a right to mobility whether or not they can pay a fare. Transit should be free.

A transit system that centers communities of color in defining safety.

Our safety is rooted in collective care, not more policing and enforcement that criminalizes poverty and profiles people of color.

A transit system that recognizes our full humanity.

As transit riders, all of our trips are important and integral to our lives, not just commuting to jobs.

A transit system that incorporates a reparations lens.

Historically disinvested communities must have priority in resource allocation, in ways that prevent displacement.

How We Get There

Dedicated and permanent funding at a scale that recognizes the essential nature of transit to our communities and economy.

Transit has been consistently and systemically under-resourced at the state and federal levels for decades. We need policymakers to prioritize significant and sustained funding — for capital expenses and operations — at a scale that is commensurate with providing quality, reliable service, not just for commuting, but for the full spectrum of community needs.

Prioritizing bus rapid transit (BRT) on high volume routes that serve communities of color.

In the Twin Cities, there are shovel-ready projects that would increase and improve service for communities that utilize and rely on transit the most. These projects and others that address historic disinvestment and environmental harms should be first in line for funding.

Decriminalization of fare evasion and reduction of law enforcement on transit.

Due to generations of wealth extraction and structural racism, communities of color are more likely to utilize transit — and are more likely to be targeted and ticketed by law enforcement. Rather than growing the number of transit police, we need to invest in alternatives, like community ambassadors, to reduce the trauma of engaging with police and decriminalize infractions that can have a devastating and disproportionate impact on riders of color.

A fare-free system to ensure transit is accessible to all.

In contrast to Minnesota, where fares have been increased in recent years, transit agencies across the nation are implementing fare-free systems. We need to identify revenue streams that do not rely on the most economically marginalized to pay for a public service that is critical to the functioning of our economy and society.

Amenities, connections and collaboration that respect the dignity of riders.

Making transit a convenient, safe and viable option requires cross-agency partnership to ensure bus stops not only have dignified amenities, like shelters, but also sidewalks and crossings that connect residents to transit.

Resources for community organizing with transit riders.

Transit riders are a community and know best the solutions to make our system work. Like housing or other advocacy, we need resources for community organizing.

Our Stories

As a community organizer, I know what's in my neighborhood and what's NOT in my neighborhood. Within a mile of my household there's not a grocery store. My job is far from my household. Many of the things I need are distant from my community and transportation creates a clear border or limitation for me. We need to ask, "Who are the perpetual winners and how is our infrastructure set with inequity as a baseline?"

Charles Frempong-Longdon

Transit isn't just about going to and from work. My family uses the bus to live our lives. When it works, it brings a type of security to our life. When it doesn't, it brings another dynamic of trauma that tells me, as a person with a disability, that I'm not supposed to be in society. As we move forward, we need to work toward a system that is far more inclusive of everyone.

Nikki Villavicencio

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the conversation around transit safety has started to focus more on public health and taking care of each other, rather than safety meaning my whiteness gets to be protected on the train. There can be tension between drivers and riders and being in a solid relationship with them, means we can have the hard conversations around race and disability that don't feel like a lecture or agitation. We're in this together.

Amity Foster

For lawmakers, there are always other issues with more need. It's our job as organizers to raise up the intersectionality of how transit serves all those issues. Personally, I need the bus to get to class and work and doctor's appointments. If I don't have transit service, I don't have access to higher education, my job and healthcare. Mobility justice is environmental justice, it's gender justice, it's racial justice — and we need to center that because access to mobility informs access to all aspects of society and whether that will be equitable or not.

Finn McGarrity

I'm on the city's transportation committee and at the same time they cut the bus stop across from my house [on the West Side of St. Paul], eliminating the loop that served public housing, they were putting forward a plan to add trains and buses for the majority white folks going to the Allianz soccer stadium.

Martin Hernandez