



THE HARDEST ROAD

Philanthropic Approaches to the
Evolving Field of Transportation Equity

This report was produced by the Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities. The Funders' Network exists to inspire, strengthen, and expand funding and philanthropic leadership that yield environmentally sustainable, socially equitable, and economically prosperous regions and communities.

The research and writing for this report were conducted from the summer of 2013 to the winter of 2014. Progress continues on a wide range of issues discussed in this report and the Funders' Network looks forward to keeping funders and advocates updated on work under way.

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INTRODUCTION

The story of transportation in the U.S. is tightly woven with race, class, and the very American belief that we all deserve an equal shot at getting some place better.

Consider Rosa Parks. Perhaps the best-known bus rider in American history, Parks is famous for sitting in the whites-only section of a Montgomery, Ala., bus and helping to end legal segregation. But a lesser-known story involving Parks better reflects the subtler inequities still at work today.

In 1930s Alabama, school buses did not carry black children. So young Rosa walked, and by the time she sat down at her desk, ready to learn, she'd spent quite a bit of extra time and effort simply to avail herself of the opportunity to learn.¹

While it's been more than half a century since the demise of "separate but equal," race and class continue to have a defining hand in how easy, or how difficult, it is to reach opportunity. Not since the Great Depression has the gap between rich and poor been as great as it is today. The economy is expanding, yet so is poverty.² Ethnic and racial diversity are at an all-time high, yet communities across the country are rapidly "sorting" by income, so that rather than living in mixed, middle-class areas, Americans are increasingly clustered in communities that are either low-income or high-income.³

It would be one thing if every community offered high-performing public schools, ready access to decent jobs, and safe transportation. But such building blocks of

upward mobility are increasingly less likely to be found in and around low-income communities. Thus, at a time when it's needed more than ever, opportunity appears to be moving further away from the people who need it the most.

The irony—or the opportunity—is that transportation is undergoing a sea change, offering myriad new ways to connect people and places. Transit ridership is soaring as Americans drive less.⁴ New technologies are enabling options like bike-sharing, car-sharing, and on-demand mobility. Employers understand transit is a must for attracting workers and they are willing to raise sizable sums for campaigns to build and expand transit systems. From the Puget Sound to St. Paul, Boston to Baltimore and beyond, metropolitan regions are investing, or planning to invest, billions of dollars for systems such as light rail and bus rapid transit.⁵

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Yet there is little to guarantee this new generation of public transit will help the very people who need mobility most—namely, the day-in, day-out riders.

Taken as a whole, these so-called “core” transit riders are overwhelmingly, and disproportionately, people of color and low-income.⁶ They tend to pay a much higher share of their incomes for transportation,⁷ are more likely to be physically cut off from better schools, health clinics, jobs, and grocery stores because such amenities are not nearby, and they often don’t own cars.⁸ As such, core transit riders are something of a proxy for the same Americans having a harder time climbing out of poverty and into the middle class.

The juxtaposition of billions of dollars in transit investment at a time of increased economic and social isolation has caught the attention of a growing number of regional and national philanthropies. This paper examines the history and context of these issues and the philanthropic efforts under way in four regions where funders are aligning with advocates and government agencies to shape once-in-a-lifetime infrastructure investments so they benefit low-income people and communities of color. Specifically, we examine:

Denver, where construction of an entirely new \$5 billion light rail system is prompting funders, community organizers, and banks to tackle transit fares, affordable housing, and health disparities: the group is called Mile High Connects. (See page 14.)

Greater Boston, where ongoing shortfalls in the region’s transit system have drawn together funders who care about issues including climate change, neighborhood development, and social equity. (See page 15.)

The Puget Sound, where an \$18 billion light rail expansion is prompting environmental and social justice funders to put technology and data-gathering tools into the hands of community members so they are more effective advocates: they are called the Sustainable Communities Funders. (See page 16.)

And,

Los Angeles, where a \$40 billion investment in transportation, coupled with statewide carbon emission rules, is prompting health, housing, environment, and social justice funders to collaborate on behalf of the regions’ most vulnerable residents: the group is known as the Los Angeles Funders’ Collaborative. (See page 18.)

Taken together, these regions offer a snapshot of the fast-evolving strategies and challenges funders and their allies experience as they tackle the emerging field of “equitable transportation.”⁹

The pages that follow examine:

- Characteristics shared by these regions;
- Challenges endemic to the transportation field;
- Strategies and tools being used by funders and their partners to improve access to opportunity; and
- Case studies of the four regions.

STEPPING BACK: WHY TRANSPORTATION?

There probably isn't a funder in the nation who would introduce herself by saying: "I am an equitable transportation grantmaker."

Apart from the fact that no one would understand what that meant, it wouldn't be accurate. Funders of transit are first and foremost funders of other issues; transit is the means to their end.

"We didn't come into this because we were interested in transit," said Ann Sewill of the California Community Foundation, which over the past two years has collaborated with The California Endowment and a handful of other funders to harness the benefit of the \$40 billion transit expansion for all Angelenos. "The Community Foundation is interested in serving the most vulnerable people of L.A. County. We want to make sure the transit build out increases opportunity—more housing, more jobs, and a healthier environment—for low-income residents. We do long term things." Indeed, the transit build-out in L.A. will impact the region for generations.

In Seattle, Michael Brown echoed a similar sentiment. "For The Seattle Foundation, transit is not the end goal," said Brown, who is Vice President, Community Programs, for the foundation, which recently formed the Puget Sound Funders Partnership for Sustainable Communities, known as the Sustainable Communities Funders, with five other foundations to leverage their region's light rail expansion. "What I really care about is how we develop and implement a regional equity agenda. How are we working to build communities of opportunity?"

Low-income residents are being pushed into the suburbs as the region experiences high growth and economic pressure, said Brown. Transit has to play a role in connecting them to jobs or the opportunity represented by the new light rail will be squandered. "It's taken 40 years to get mass transit into place here," he said. "For our public agencies, the emphasis is on implementation, not community engagement."

That is the gap Brown and his colleagues are now seeking to fill. With their first grants, Sustainable Communities Funders equipped equity-focused groups with mapping and visualization tools to analyze and advocate for transit service that will better serve neighborhood residents.

Across the country, in Boston, the Barr Foundation is using transportation as a way to bridge climate change and smart growth goals with racial justice. Barr has supported nearly every piece of regional research on transportation in recent years, including a report that revealed nearly half of Latinos in Massachusetts routinely forgo basic necessities in order to pay for transportation¹⁰ and another that found that black commuters in Boston spend an extra 66 hours a year waiting, riding, and transferring on buses, compared to white bus riders.¹¹

"The research has been about getting clarity on where the inequities are," said Barr Senior Program Officer Mary Skelton Roberts. "How do people get around? What are their options? Where is transit? Where isn't it? Who benefits? And who doesn't?"

In Denver, Patrick Horvath and his philanthropic colleagues are grappling with how to ensure their region's

massive new light rail system helps the people who need it most.

“I see our work as a hybrid,” said Horvath, of The Denver Foundation, which in early 2014 coordinated a series of community meetings on how key land near a new commuter rail station should be developed.

“We are organizing, influencing, participating in community engagement, trying to help get those most affected by the transit build out at the table where decisions are being made about how land is used,” said Horvath. “If we were just sitting in endless meetings with the usual suspects and spending our time on internal grant review processes, there would be an abstract quality to the social justice goals we are trying to achieve. But working to engage low-income residents and communities in actual decision-making processes enables us to get out there and actually do the work.”

HOW IS PROGRESS MEASURED?

“A lot of that is going to be anecdotal and we understand that,” said Horvath. “At the end of the day, the question

I want to be able to answer is ‘How influential were low-income residents in making decisions about this project that occurred in their own community?’”

Measuring success is a challenge for nearly every funder, and it’s particularly tough for funders of transportation equity. The needs and travel habits of different demographic groups are difficult to track with existing datasets and transportation models. Specific information about riders can be difficult to assess. But it’s not impossible.

Boston, for example, has maps showing who, among its residents, experiences commutes of 15, 30, 60, 90 minutes or more. When those maps are overlaid with maps showing where people of certain racial and ethnic backgrounds live, the disparities become stark.

“It doesn’t take a statistician to see the correlation,” said Todd Vogel of the Loom Foundation in Seattle. Vogel recently used such maps to illustrate for other funders the notion that it’s not just access to good schools and better-paying jobs that are harder for lower-income people and people of color—it’s also access to efficient transportation.



photo courtesy of The Denver Foundation

NEW TRANSIT, OLD TRANSIT, COMMON THEMES

Whether it's Denver, Seattle, Los Angeles, or Boston, social justice and inclusion are central themes for funders involved in transportation. These regions share other characteristics as well.

Three of the places—Denver, the Puget Sound, and Los Angeles—represent a national trend in which costly transit expansions are being paid for through tax increases approved at the ballot box by voters, almost always with major support from chambers of commerce and businesses.

Boston characterizes an equally prevalent national trend at the other end of the spectrum, in which older, so-called legacy transit systems are struggling with aging equipment, backlogged maintenance, and a lack of public will to invest huge sums of money in unglamorous, but essential, repairs.

Another common theme is rapid population growth coupled with increasing inequality.¹² The earnings of high-income households continue to increase while low- and middle-income households' earnings fall in regions throughout the country, setting into motion a cascade of inequities.¹³ Advocates and elected officials are devising new policies and strategies to make it easier for low-wage workers to get to childcare, healthcare, education, and training. This is where affordable, well-placed transit can be a major help.

Finally, these regions have leaders who have been collaborating on equity, transportation, and smart growth for several years as part of multi-stakeholder networks that blend related, but often siloed, efforts, including climate change, workforce development, public health, and economic development.

On the philanthropic side, many of the funders in these regions are connected through peer learning forums on other issues (housing, climate change, smart growth, equitable economic development) coordinated by organizations including the Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities (TFN). As funders have come to view transit as a lever for broader change, they are turning to peer forums and networks to accelerate learning.

On the government side, regional agencies in Denver, the Puget Sound, and Boston each received between \$4 million - \$5 million, along with technical assistance from national experts on sustainability, from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development as part of the Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grants Program. The funds have helped agencies engage social equity groups in planning for transportation, housing, and other backbone infrastructure issues.¹⁴ For some agencies such collaboration with grassroots groups was a first, creating relationships where none had existed. The partnerships that resulted created a platform upon which philanthropies could build.

BIG MONEY, FUZZY RESULTS

If there were just three facts for a funder to know in order to understand the leverage represented by transportation, they would be as follows:

- Congress spends \$50 billion a year on transportation¹⁵;
- Transportation is routinely the second-highest household cost for Americans¹⁶ and often the single highest cost for the poorest of Americans¹⁷; and
- The transportation sector alone is the second largest contributor of greenhouse gas emissions.¹⁸

Yet unlike public health or education, no commonly accepted yardsticks of success guide national investments in transportation. Transportation is technically a grant program in the United States, handed out to states under funding formulas created during the Eisenhower Administration, when the highway was king. The federal transportation bill has a storied history as a classic pork provider that for decades operated as a compilation of earmarked pet projects for Republicans and Democrats alike (e.g., the Alaskan “bridge to nowhere”).

Meanwhile, at the state and regional levels, transportation planners and engineers often lack even informal relationships with their land use counterparts (and vice versa), creating missed opportunity after missed opportunity for more strategic planning and smarter spending. Even as there is growing recognition that roads and bridges and buses and trains are not ends to themselves but a means to other outcomes (e.g., earning a living, bringing a child to school, creating a healthy environment), the transportation industry as a whole is unprepared to articulate how its investments contribute to larger societal goals.

Over the past five years, support from national philanthropies such as the Rockefeller, Ford, Surdna, and Kresge Foundations helped build advocacy, policy, and research coalitions that have connected the dots between public health, economic competitiveness, the environment, and equity. The last federal bill, passed in 2012, was the first in the nation’s history to articulate broad goals for transportation, and the next bill offers a chance to strengthen them. But more work remains.¹⁹

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

Against this backdrop, there is no shortage of strategies funders undertake to pursue transportation equity.

Their efforts range from encouraging tighter coordination among land use and transportation agencies by bringing those players together, pushing for transparent fiscal and public health analyses of transportation projects, funding research that demonstrates connections between health, transit, and the built environment, and supporting policies that put affordable homes and entry-level jobs near transit. The list is long and getting longer.

Generally speaking, however, there are four major goals funders and advocates employ to encourage more equitable transportation.

KEEPING PEOPLE CLOSE TO TRANSIT

When transit comes in, land values rise, especially if it's fixed rail.²⁰ The conundrum becomes how to help people who are lower-income remain in place when transit is built nearby—or how to help low-income people move into places that have transit, but higher land values.

Either way, the main strategy centers on affordable housing. Whether it's preserving existing affordable housing near transit or building new, subsidized housing near transit, key strategies including zoning policies (e.g., multi-family and inclusionary housing) and financing tools such as loan funds and land banking, the latter of which holds prime land near transit to control for rising costs.

Other efforts are key, as well. For example, community education and old-fashioned organizing are often necessary to overcome objections to new affordable housing from property owners who perceive apartments and townhomes as inappropriate for their local communities.



photo courtesy of Sound Transit

MAKING TRANSIT CONNECT TO SOMEPLACE WORTHWHILE

Transportation is only as valuable as where it takes you. Thus, routes and frequency of service are make-or-break issues. Given the imperfect information available to most transit agencies about where riders are, and where they need to go, strategies in this arena center on community engagement and data gathering to ascertain key needs and destinations.

Increasingly, another strategy in this arena asks, “How can employers be lured or relocated to places that are closer to transit?” Indeed, new research suggests jobs near transit are just as or perhaps more powerful for achieving equity as placing homes near transit, which tends to be where most attention is paid.²¹

KEEPING FARES AFFORDABLE

While school systems have long provided free or reduced meals to students based on lower household incomes, finding a similarly simple approach for subsidizing low-income transit riders has remained challenging. Senior citizens and children often receive discounted fares, but a discount by age, versus income, often misses the people who financially need help.

As new systems are built—potentially increasing the distance people travel—and as light rail replaces buses (which are typically cheaper), there is increasing focus on ways to ensure fares are equitable.²² The Puget Sound for instance, has committed to a low-income bus fare of \$1.50 (instead of the current peak one-zone fare of \$2.50).

KEEPING HEALTH IN FOCUS

Whether it’s poor air quality that exacerbates health problems or unsafe streets, land use and transportation patterns have a significant impact on public health. Research shows that places built to accommodate driving, instead of walking or biking, have residents who exercise less and are exposed to more transportation-related air pollution (specifically ground-level ozone and particulate matter). The impacts often include respiratory illnesses, heart diseases, traffic-related fatalities, and obesity.²³ But in denser more compact areas that accommodate public transportation, bicycling, and walking, these impacts are less prevalent. Since every transit trip begins and ends with a walk (even if it’s from a car or a bike), this is a growing area of focus for public health funders. In California and Denver, among other places, health funders are helping to analyze the impacts of the built environment on health and health disparities.



BROUGHT TOGETHER BY INEQUITY

Very few funders leap into action as a group at the recognition that they share problems. Rather, they begin by learning, understanding common issues, and exploring opportunities. For some funders, a map known as an “equity atlas” is proving useful at jumpstarting these conversations.

An equity atlas is a series of maps overlaid with a graphic depiction of certain social, demographic, and economic conditions; the goal is to reveal disparities experienced by different populations.

Because equity atlases are presented in the context of a particular neighborhood and community, they have proven effective at grounding sometimes-abstract conversations about inequity in real-life places. An equity atlas presents multi-faceted information about a single place—for instance, test scores, rates of asthma, the prevalence of libraries, and levels of income—and can paint complex pictures of conditions under which residents thrive or suffer. Not everyone can agree on what “equitable” looks like. But most people can see when inequity exists and that serves as a starting place for future work.

Powerful as they are in some ways, equity atlases don’t do the hard work of creating alliances, bending public will, raising money, and convincing elected officials and entrenched agencies to change their priorities.

Thus, as funders cast out lines in many directions to promote equity, some are increasingly interested in ways to objectively measure impact. Taking a page from the public health community, which has become sophisticated at tracking whether and how health is impacted by decision-making, some regions are experimenting with screens that can help show—or indicate—if transit investments are creating more equitable outcomes.

In some cases, indicators can be straightforward—for example, are property values going up after transit arrives, and are low-income people leaving the neighborhood? But some important questions—particularly around quality jobs—remain difficult to answer. Data is imperfect, and, in the case of the kinds of wages and benefits employers offer, are often not publicly available.

“Working towards equity and tracking equity are iterative,” said Jane Tigan of the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, who developed a simple list of 13 indicators for the Central Corridor Funders Collaborative, a transit-focused funder group based in St. Paul. “It’s not as though it’s clear and everyone knows how to do this and they’re executing it. It’s real trial and error. I don’t know if that’s always understood even by the people who are doing it.”

Jonathan Sage-Martinson, who served as the first staffer for the Central Corridor Funders Collaborative, agreed. “When we try to get too exact, too specific, that can be an even greater hazard,” he said. “It’s easy to want to get very precise, but if it involves a cosine of some sort, you’ve lost your audience. You don’t want to be four-fifths equitable. You want something you can really grasp.”

CONCLUSION: THE WORK AHEAD

The notion that transportation offers freedom and opportunity is far older than any philanthropic collaborative or light rail expansion.

From the Mayflower to the Underground Railroad, from Homer Plessy to the Freedom Riders, individuals and groups have long fought for what today’s advocates might call “equal mobility”—safe, easy, affordable ways to move from place to place.

While the fight for transportation equity has a long history, the work among funders in regions where transit is growing represents something new. Most places are still in the discovery phase: identifying issues, creating relationships, gathering information, and testing to see what works. Some strategies are evolving as quickly as the technology and data gathering that are so central to this work. Other strategies, such as community organizing and building political will through coalitions, continue to play important roles because, at the end of the day, changing where money flows involves power.

In places where transit is straining from lack of resources, like Boston, funders are on the front lines with the advocates they support, working to protect people who are the most vulnerable from service reductions and fare increases that threaten to cut lifelines. In places where new transit is being built, funders are working to prioritize investments in transit so that the people most in need of mobility and opportunity are first in line.

The promising news is that the upsurge in transit comes at a time of high awareness, even among federal agencies, that previous generations of transportation infrastructure not only bypassed communities of color but often

betrayed them by condemning property for highway and rail construction and tearing through neighborhoods. More rigorous enforcement and implementation of civil rights laws and environmental justice regulations is putting an onus on public agencies to understand and meet the needs of their core riders.

The challenging news is that many of the systems that perpetuate decision-making remain largely untouched—the funding formulas, the cultural biases, the access to information and power. This makes the role of funders all the more important as they help ensure the voices of the public, especially those most disadvantaged in our society, are heard as resources are meted out.

As access to technology and data advances, it’s easier to identify where, and for whom, disparities exist; this makes it easier to tell stories about inequities and identify points of intersection where alliances can be built.

Funders are adding value by supporting research and analysis to round out our collective understanding of who transit serves and how well. Funders are helping to build the capacity of grassroots groups to identify and advocate for their own needs. And funders are helping to create a common “table” which normally does not exist in transportation, at which negotiating and information-sharing can unfold among interests who represent transportation, the environment, social equity, public health, community development, and more.

It would be a tragic irony if, as regions across the United States reinvest in transit and offer greater mobility for more Americans, the growing class of people who need it most are bypassed and left stuck in places of no opportunity.

IF I HAD A HAMMER: TOOLS FOR UNDERSTANDING DISPARITY AND CREATING EQUITY

THE PROBLEM:

How to avoid displacement as transit investments increase land values.

Transit, especially if it's fixed rail, is known to increase land values. While rising values can be a positive influence on struggling communities by attracting needed services and increasing the quality and number of local amenities, they can also push out residents because of higher housing costs. The conundrum is how to enable low-income people to stay in the area as services improve, yet housing prices rise. Nearly all the tools currently available focus on managing housing costs as a way to retain low-income people and communities of color.

Tools include:

- Loan Funds to help underwrite the cost of holding key pieces of land near transit before values skyrocket, so they can be developed equitably; they also help leverage development of below-market rate housing near transit.²⁴
- Land Banks help hold land until a transit-suitable use has been identified.
- Federal Regulations: New rules in the New Starts program, which funds most major transit projects around the country, gives higher rankings to transit projects based on how well they serve affordable housing. This will kick start thinking among transit agencies about the placement and number of lower-income housing units.

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THE PROBLEM:

How to analyze decisions for their impact on equity.

Where a bus line goes, or where service is cut, impacts riders differently based on their dependence upon transit. Many transit decisions are made with only a crude understanding of how they will impact disadvantaged populations. The strategies below seek to shift conversations away from being reactive to being forward-looking.

Tools include:

- Equity Impact Screens: At their simplest, impact screens pose a series of questions for planners. They are designed to daylight who, if anyone, will be disadvantaged by a given proposed project or program.
- Racial Equity Toolkit: Seattle's city government uses the following process for analyzing the equity impacts of land use decisions. For a step by step explanation, see: http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/RSJI/RacialEquityToolkit_StepbyStepInstructionSheet.pdf

- **Equity Review Tool:** Washington State’s King County launched its review tool in 2008 and it’s been strengthened a number of times since. Today, the tool is used on every county funding decision. It walks planners through questions about how a proposed funding change would impact low-income people and communities of color across 14 determinants of equity that are social, physical, and economic. The tool helped King County’s transit system identify corridors with many low-income and minority residents, for whom they have now set higher service-level targets, knowing those residents rely more heavily on transit. The tool also helped the transit agency target investments that reduce overcrowding and improve schedule reliability, which benefits low-income and minority communities where transit services typically get heavy use.
- **Equity Review Process:** Also being utilized in King County, this is a more in-depth, quantitative look at the kinds of issues addressed in the impact screens and tools referred to above. Whereas the screens flag likely impacts of a decision, the review process goes in-depth to compare the disproportionate impact alternative proposals have upon certain populations.

THE PROBLEM

How to measure progress towards social equity.

Information available from standard sources like the Census and the American Community Survey only go so far in providing a snapshot of how people in a given region are faring. Reliable, region-wide statistics on who rides transit—their incomes, their destinations, what they need transit for—are difficult to find.

Tools include:

- Equity Indicators measure conditions that can be compared across subgroups—for example, people

who live in a certain ZIP code or people of a certain race or income bracket. Indicators can’t answer why certain conditions exist, but they can hint at certain directions—offering indications of relationships between factors. For example, a high rate of obesity among people in a certain neighborhood says very little when looked at by itself. But if you found that same neighborhood has no parks, few sidewalks, and fast food restaurants but no grocery stores, you might wonder if there is a connection. A number of places are developing indicators.

- **STAR Community Rating System:** The STAR Community Rating System is the nation’s first framework and certification system for evaluating and quantifying the sustainability of U.S. communities. It sets goals for seven community-scale outcomes; one of the seven outcome areas is equity and empowerment. Communities seeking to track their success at improving equity and empowerment look at objectives including poverty prevention and alleviation, environmental justice and equitable services, and access.

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- The Tracker is an annual report card that measures progress towards four outcomes including creation of affordable housing and preservation of local businesses. Using 13 benchmarks, such as housing prices and rates of employment, the Tracker helps determine if displacement is occurring, and if equity goals are being met. It was developed to measure progress toward equitable development along the Green Line, formerly known as the Central Corridor, a light rail line connecting Minneapolis to St. Paul.

THE PROBLEM

How to use transit to connect people to places of opportunity.

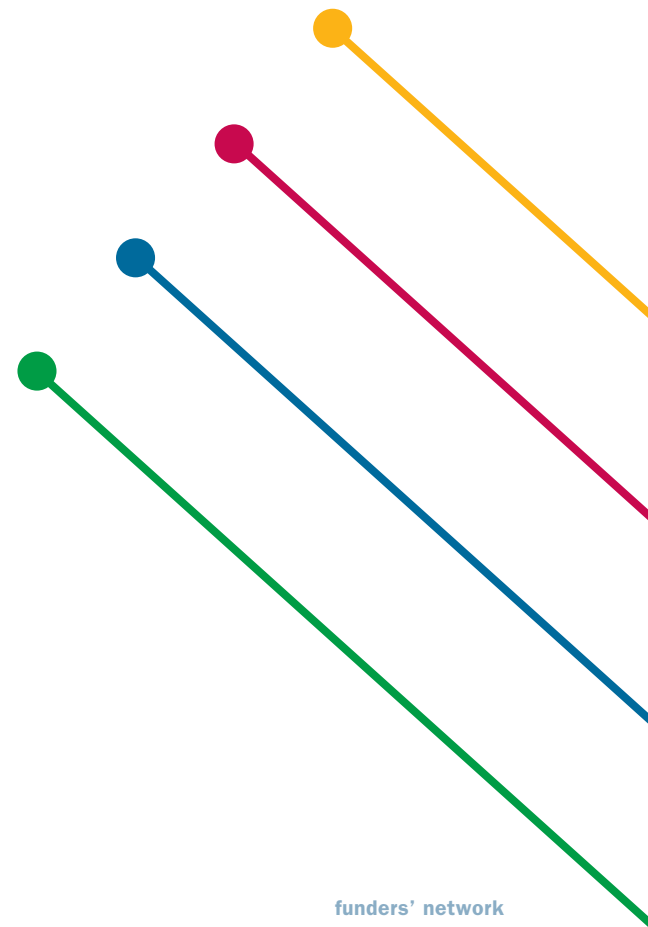
While it's intuitive to understand that building a transit station in a certain neighborhood will impact local residents, in fact the greatest impact for residents is in what that station becomes a portal to. This requires both a place-based and a regional view which considers where transit lines run and what they connect, or remove, people from.

Tools:

- A problem-solving framework known as “access to opportunity,” or sometimes “geography of opportunity,” is a helpful starting place for funders and others. This framework zooms out from the individual level to consider the context—that is, the geography—in which individual choices unfold (e.g., having to take two buses to buy fresh food sheds light on eating choices). Maps and other visualization tools are integral to this framework. Examples include:
 - Pioneered by Portland, Ore., an equity atlas is a series of maps overlaid with a graphic depiction of certain social, demographic, and economic conditions with the goal of revealing disparities experienced by different populations. Because

equity atlases are presented in the context of a particular neighborhood and community, they have proven effective at grounding sometimes abstract conversations about inequity in real-life places. The multiple angles an equity atlas presents about a single place—for instance, arrest rates, test scores, prevalence of libraries or check cashing places—can paint complex pictures of conditions under which residents thrive or suffer.

- Opportunity maps are a version of equity atlases. But while an equity atlas offers a snapshot of existing conditions, opportunity maps aggregate “high opportunity” places to create “areas” of opportunity. By collapsing many pieces of data, opportunity maps are simpler, visually, and helpful in generating community conversation (versus lots of questions about what all the data means). Opportunity maps are not considered to be as helpful in creating policy interventions as equity atlases.



CASE STUDIES: A SNAPSHOT OF FOUR REGIONS

CASE STUDY

Denver

A Mile High Trial By Fire



In 2009, as six new transit lines were being planned in the Denver region, a handful of organizations approached local foundations with an idea: What about leveraging the enormous public investment in this transit system to ensure that the Denver region’s most vulnerable residents have better access to the jobs, healthcare, healthy food, and education they need?

With encouragement and financial support from the Ford Foundation, which has an extensive portfolio in



photo courtesy of The Denver Foundation

metropolitan opportunity, the idea gained traction and, in 2011, Mile High Connects was born.

Among funder groups that work collaboratively on transportation, Mile High Connects is unique for two reasons. From its inception, the group included non-funders as equal members. Thus, alongside family and private foundations and banks sit organizations that advocate for working women, living wage jobs, and economic justice.

In addition, Mile High Connects is the only transit collaborative that overtly emphasizes community organizing.

The group’s first activity together was creating the Denver Regional Equity Atlas, an analysis of educational, income, health, and other disparities overlaid on the new transit network. It was something of a trial by fire for the new coalition. Members sorted themselves into committees based on areas of expertise (housing, health, education, and jobs) and spent the first year grappling with data. Together, they laid out inequities in the region. In the process, these health funders, housing advocates, community foundations, and education reformers began to see connections among each other’s priorities.

“I think [the Atlas’s] most important value has been in case-making, the role it’s played in helping explain to others why we are working on the issues we work on and why we created a collaborative to do that,” said Matt Barry of the Piton Foundation, who led the initial development of the atlas project with Bill Sadler of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

In addition to forging new relationships, demonstrable change has occurred. The information gathered and relationships formed recently helped community leaders save a bus route that served low-income residents yet was slated for closure following the opening of light rail service. By painting a picture of why affordable housing

near transit stops is so important, Mile High Connects helped double the size of a loan fund that promotes affordable housing near transit, explained Melinda Pollack of Enterprise Community Partners (Enterprise), who co-chairs the Mile High Connects steering committee with Patrick Horvath of The Denver Foundation.

Mile High Connects has leveraged other funding, as well. In December 2013, the Denver Housing Authority won a \$500,000 grant from HUD's Choice Neighborhoods program, partly due to community organizing and mapping undertaken in the low-income Sun Valley community.

More recently, Mile High Connects received a matching grant from a national consortium of health funders known as the Convergence Partnership. The funds served as the base of a pooled grant fund that is engaging other area nonprofits in the work of creating healthier communities through effective public transportation.

Monica Lyle of the Colorado Health Foundation said her experience in Mile High Connects has broadened her understanding of how the built environment affects health.

"We were at a spot where the built environment was a new program area for us," Lyle said. "We were trying to figure out what to do in this area. When Mile High Connects came along it was like, 'Okay, we are willing to learn more, and it seems like it might be a fit.'"

"Getting engaged in this work has helped open my eyes to a whole host of issues that relate to low-income communities and communities of color," said Lyle. "We come at it through transit, but what I am learning goes beyond transit."

Pollack, vice president of transit-oriented development at Enterprise, credits the funders with a willingness to experiment and step out of more traditional roles.

"I think it's working in Denver because our funders have been humble coming into this," said Pollack. "They hadn't funded in this space before, they didn't have the depth. It's amazing to watch the transformation within the foundations, the way they are turning their focus to embrace these issues."

CASE STUDY

Greater Boston

The Challenges of an Older System Facing Huge Growth



With the oldest subway system in the nation, Boston's T is something of a poster child for transit woes. Maintenance workers for the T famously use hairnets to keep motors running during heavy snowstorms and employ blacksmiths to manufacture parts so old they are no longer in mainstream production.²⁵

In the summer of 2013, with funder support, a coalition of community, housing, transportation, and

environmental advocates, coordinating with business groups, succeeded in their several year quest to get the state legislature to pass a multi-year, \$600 million-a-year funding package to fill the state's most pressing transportation gaps. It was a major victory that helped forestall major fare hikes that would have hurt Boston's most vulnerable riders.

Meanwhile, plans are moving ahead to extend or fill in a handful of subway and commuter rail lines to improve access to transit services and accommodate new population growth. The best known of the "infill" projects is the Fairmount line, which, with heavy investment from The Boston Foundation and other funders, has been transformed from a line that bypassed low-income neighborhoods to one that provides three new stops in these communities, better connecting residents to downtown jobs and opportunity. Now, the question is how the land surrounding those new stations will be redeveloped to benefit local residents.

“The role of the foundation has been like a quarterback and funding alone does not do it,” said Geeta Pradhan of The Boston Foundation. “When there is a victory, it’s not our victory, it’s a collective victory. We are a convener, connector, advocate, and funder.”

Other transit system extensions are under way, as well. Among them is the Green Line, which will extend tracks and service from Cambridge through the city of Somerville and into Medford. While the region desperately needs this expanded service, it will increase the likelihood that residents will be displaced in these long-time working-class neighborhoods that are fast gentrifying. With foundation support, several community-based organizations are working on resident-led equitable development plans for these communities. And, the regional planning agency, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, is undertaking research and community outreach in an effort to mitigate the expected displacement.

Boston is among the regions experimenting with ways to measure whether progress toward equity is being achieved.

A report released in 2011, the *State of Equity in Metropolitan Boston*, looks at how the region’s residents are faring across a range of issues, neighborhoods, ethnicities, and income brackets. The indicators offer a way to track whether broad equity goals (among them transit access) articulated in the community-driven MetroFuture plan are in fact being met. For example, among the plan’s goals are: that “fewer of the region’s residents will live in poverty,” and “more minority and immigrant workers will have opportunities to advance on the career ladder, acquire assets, and build wealth.” How to track if that is happening?

“Community members and leaders know intuitively and anecdotally that inequities exist,” said Mary Skelton Roberts of the Barr Foundation, which funded the *State of Equity* report. “Actually quantifying them and making them public in a report like this keeps people on the ground engaged and creates greater accountability for policymakers.”

CASE STUDY

Puget Sound

Expanding the Equity Focus of an Expanding Light Rail System



In 1990, well before the term “smart growth” was coined, Washington State became one of the first in the nation to enact a growth management policy. Spurred by rapid development that was eroding quality of life, the policy laid the groundwork for measures to limit sprawl, later setting the stage for a more efficient transportation system.

It took two decades and more than one try, but Puget Sound voters eventually approved a new regional

transportation authority that would oversee the \$18 billion build-out of a light rail system. When complete in 2023, the project will more than double the current transit system, expanding service to three counties and connecting the larger Seattle metropolitan area.

While the Puget Sound Regional Council developed a plan to coordinate decisions around land use, economic, and environmental issues, the plan was a vision document and too high-level to be implemented. So in 2011, an initiative called “Growing Transit Communities” was launched with the goal of translating the region’s vision for transit build-out into actionable next steps with a sharp equity focus.

Growing Transit Communities undertook two major projects, which are just being completed. The first was an “opportunity mapping” process that highlighted assets and challenges around future transit corridors.

The second entailed building the capacity of local organizations by creating a Regional Equity Network. Ben Bakkenta of the Puget Sound Regional Council explained that nearly \$500,000 in small grants was given to community-based organizations which, in turn, held neighborhood forums and gathered input from their own constituencies on the planning process.

Growing Transit Communities was funded largely with a high-profile, \$5 million grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Sustainable Communities program. But while foundations were involved in similar Regional Planning grants in Boston, Denver, the Twin Cities, and elsewhere, philanthropy was not at the table developing the Puget Sound application.

Shortly after the Puget Sound received its grant, funders came together for a briefing on the project, and relationships began to form. The Puget Sound Funders Partnership for Sustainable Communities has become increasingly intrigued by opportunities to support greater transit equity.

Towards that end, the group provided funding for a summit of equity organizations in October 2013; they also made grants to an unusual coalition of immigrant rights, environmental, and social equity groups to deepen the capacity of grassroots groups to analyze how a pending 17 percent cut in bus service will impact low-income residents and people of color.

The interesting twist is that King County, which runs the bus service being cut, is perhaps the only county in the nation where every financial decision must be run through a series of questions aimed at highlighting if, and where, disproportionate impacts will be felt by communities of color.

"You can cut service by 17 percent in infinite ways," said Richard Gelb, who is overseeing the equity screening process for King County. Thus, the point of the analysis he leads is to identify the most equitable way to make cuts, by looking closely at the jobs, stores, hospitals, schools, and parks that are assumed to be valued destinations.

Will the parallel analysis community organizations are undertaking be taken into consideration? Gelb said he welcomes the additional input and analysis.

"It's always a political decision," Gelb said, referring to budget cuts, but "it's also about building capacity to advocate." Funders and government are working together to sharpen their analysis, and to lift up the voices of, and build the power of, low-income people. The hope is that this will move us, deliberately, toward a more equitable transit system.



photo: Atomic Taco via Flickr.com

CASE STUDY

Los Angeles

A Region Famous for Cars
Transitions to Transit

In 2008, Californians set into motion new legislation and funding that will transform Los Angeles from a region famous for cars and congestion into one rich with transit.

California's Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008 (Senate Bill 375), has fundamentally changed transportation and land use planning in the state: regions are now required to prepare integrated transportation, land use, and housing plans in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) from cars and trucks by helping people drive less; by supporting transit, walking, and biking; and by promoting more compact development. In addition, the regions must show how they plan to provide enough housing for residents of all income levels.²⁶

At the same time, \$40 billion is flowing into the Los Angeles region to dramatically expand the region's public transportation network. The majority of these funds, which flow from a voter-approved sales tax measure known as Measure R, will be spent on 12 transit lines (consisting of light rail projects, subway extensions, and bus rapid transit projects) and will support bus operations. The new transit projects will create 43 new transit stations and benefit 70 existing transit stations—most of them in economically vulnerable communities.²⁷

Despite the advantageous framework offered by SB 375 and Measure R, much needs to be done to ensure that both initiatives are implemented in ways that advance health, equity, and environmental goals. Fortunately, there are many opportunities to help shape the implementation of these two measures to ensure that they serve the needs of low-income residents. Thus, a group of Los

Angeles funders have coalesced around the proposition that their region can become not just more transit-friendly, but also more equitable.

Known as the Los Angeles Funders' Collaborative, the group of eight organizations is comprised of six funders, the Los Angeles County Health Department, and Enterprise Community Partners. They span interests ranging from health, to urban greening and parks, to leadership development and social justice. In just two years, the group has created its own vision for what equitable, transit-centered growth looks like in the region, along with specific strategies and activities to achieve that vision, such as convening and educating stakeholders in order to create a shared agenda, building the capacity of community based organizations, driving policy change, supporting innovative pilot projects, improving government effectiveness, engaging funders, and informing government agencies about the implications of equity.

In 2013, funders released the Los Angeles Equity Atlas, which maps disparities in the region and is being used as an educational tool to bring a wide range of agencies and actors into conversations about equity and growth. The Atlas maps the connections between transit, jobs, housing, and community resources in Los Angeles County, and outlines a new vision for the county, in which all residents and workers benefit from Los Angeles' \$40 billion investment in transit. The Atlas also identifies key social equity outcomes, recommends strategies for achieving those outcomes, and establishes a baseline for measuring those outcomes as the transit network is built out. Funders presented the Atlas to the deputies of the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (LA Metro), and took the Atlas to the Southern California Association of Governments to brief them on some of the race and ethnicity issues the Atlas helps lift up.

Funders also supported the University of Southern California's Manuel Pastor to bring together the many different policies and pieces of research affecting equitable transportation in Los Angeles into one place, helping to make clear what work lies ahead. The document—*An Agenda for Equity: A Framework for Building a Just Transportation System in Los Angeles*

County—is a reader-friendly document. Its central premise is that an equitable transportation system is crucial to achieving equitable development and sustainable economic growth for the region. It lays out six key issue areas (money, mobility, housing and development, health and environment, jobs, and goods movement) that fall under the umbrella of transportation equity and explains how they relate to conditions in Los Angeles. For example: Latinos are almost half of the region’s population and comprise a majority of the region’s transit riders, yet they live in areas that are quite “mismatched” from where jobs are. Thus, the coming transit expansions offer a way to better serve that growing population while helping to meet carbon reduction goals. The report concludes with recommendations for turning the vision of achieving transportation equity in L.A. into reality.

Another effort funders have supported builds the capacity of city agencies to implement more equitable policies. Specifically, funders have supported two new positions within the Mayor’s office. The first is a staffer who is working to advance equitable transit-oriented development along the city’s transit corridors; the second is a consultant who is helping to bring more parks and green spaces to low-income communities. For some of this work, funders leveraged matching funds from TFN’s Partners for Places grant program (formerly the Local Sustainability Matching Fund), coordinated in partnership with the Urban Sustainability Directors Network.

It’s the Atlas, however, that is the most visible piece of work thus far. Like Denver’s version, the Atlas is essentially a communication tool, but it’s also an educational piece and a way for stakeholders who care about housing, air quality, or equity to glean specific pieces of data to support their own advocacy efforts. In addition to maps and data, the Atlas emphasizes recommendations for how to move towards implementing change. One of the recommendations, for example, is to start “...prioritizing key geographies and investments ... across agencies and sectors.”

While it may seem obvious, coordination of this nature can be difficult to achieve. It also represents a key role funders can play—helping to identify the most promising strategies and places to effect change.

Public funds are sometimes “spread like peanut butter,” said Heather Hood of Enterprise Community Partners. “If there are 100 station areas to be developed, it’s very hard for government agencies to say: these 30 are the most strategic to begin with. But foundations can do that. Rather than going all over, it’s about leaning in, bringing more than funding to the task, and being very targeted,” she said.



photo courtesy of the California Community Foundation

ENDNOTES

- 1 In Pine Level, Ala., where Rosa Parks attended elementary school, white children were bused to their school, while black children had to walk to theirs. “I’d see the bus pass every day,” she said. “But to me, that was a way of life; we had no choice but to accept what was the custom. The bus was among the first ways I realized there was a black world and a white world.” “The Story Behind the Bus,” The Henry Ford. <https://www.thehenryford.org/exhibits/rosaparks/story.asp>.
- 2 “U.S. Poverty Rises Despite Economic Recovery,” Reuters, September 17, 2013. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/17/us-usa-economy-poverty-idUSBRE98G0PN20130917>.
- 3 Kendra Bischoff and Sean F. Reardon, “Residential Segregation by Income, 1970-2009,” October 16, 2013. <http://www.s4.brown.edu/us2010/Data/Report/report10162013.pdf>.
- 4 John Schwartz, “Young Americans Lead Trend to Less Driving,” New York Times, May 13, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/14/us/report-finds-americans-are-driving-less-led-by-youth.html?_r=0.
- 5 Most light rail and bus rapid transit projects receive federal support through the New Starts and Small Starts program within the U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Transit Administration, which requires local matches. To assess current and upcoming transit projects, its website is a good place to look: http://www.fta.dot.gov/12304_14366.html.
- 6 Mike Maciag, “Public Transportation’s Demographic Divide,” *Governing*, February 25, 2014. <http://www.governing.com/topics/transportation-infrastructure/gov-public-transportation-riders-demographic-divide-for-cities.html>.
- 7 “The portion of household income devoted to transportation tends to be particularly high for lower income households that own an automobile and low for households that do not own an automobile. These factors are generally overlooked because most statistics aggregate the two groups together, essentially hiding the excessive cost burden of vehicle ownership on poor households.” “Strategies to Increase Transportation Affordability,” Victoria Transport Policy Institute, Updated June 11, 2014. <http://www.vtpi.org/tdm/tdm106.htm>.
- 8 “Where We Need to Go: A Civil Rights Roadmap for Transportation Equity,” The Leadership Conference Education Fund, March 2011. <http://www.aapd.com/what-we-do/transportation/where-we-need-to-go.pdf>.
- 9 Funders within the regions profiled here are part of a larger cohort that includes national philanthropies and regional counterparts in places including the San Francisco Bay Area, Baltimore, and the Twin Cities, whose efforts we covered in previous publications.
- 10 Stephanie Pollack, Liz Williams, Russ Lopez, and Ivette Luna, “The Toll of Transportation,” Northeastern University Dukakis Center for Urban & Regional Policy, November 2013. <http://www.northeastern.edu/dukakiscenter/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/The-Toll-of-Transportation-Final-Report.pdf>.
- 11 Eric Moskowitz, “Wide Racial Gap Exists on Speed of Boston-area Commutes,” Boston.com, November 24, 2012. <http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/2012/11/24/wide-racial-gap-exists-speed-boston-area-commutes/oW7hHJ0IFWluX6eQI15QPL/story.html>.
- 12 The U.S. experienced its third largest population gain in history from 2000 to 2010, adding more than 27 million people. One-third of Americans now live in the core part of urbanized areas, the highest proportion since 1950. Elizabeth S. Overman, “Nation is in Midst of Demographic Transitions in Multiple Categories,” *PA Times*, American Society for Public Administration, August 2011. <http://patimes.org/america-grays-majority-minority-shifts-and-urbanization-accelerates/>.
- 13 High-income kids who don’t graduate from college are 2.5 times more likely to end up rich than low-income kids who do. Matthew O’Brien, “‘The Great Gatsby Curve’: Why It’s So Hard for the Poor to Get Ahead,” *The Atlantic*, June 18, 2013. <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/06/the-great-gatsby-curve-why-its-so-hard-for-the-poor-to-get-ahead/276943/>.
- 14 The HUD grants referred to here came from the Office of Economic Resilience (formerly known as the Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities), which offered \$240 million in competitive, three-year grants in 2010 and 2011; the larger among the grants, referred to as Regional Planning grants, encouraged regional planning with a strong equity focus. The

first round of Regional Planning grants, issued in 2010, included Boston's Metropolitan Area Planning Council (\$4 million); the Puget Sound Regional Planning Council (just under \$5 million) and the Twin Cities' MetCouncil (\$5 million). The second and last round of the Regional Planning grants, in 2011, included the Denver Region Council of Governments, (\$4.5 million), the Baltimore Metropolitan Council (\$3.5 million), and the San Francisco Bay Area's Metropolitan Transportation Commission (just under \$5 million). In addition, most of the regions above also received support from several national funders including the Ford and Surdna Foundations, which have national portfolios focused on regional equity.

15 Eric Beech, "U.S. Senate Panel Backs Transport Bill to Maintain Funding," Reuters, May 15, 2014. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/15/usa-senate-transportation-idUSL1N0O10Y120140515>.

16 Federal Highway Administration Livability Initiative, "Transportation and Housing Costs Fact Sheet." http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/livability/fact_sheets/transandhousing.cfm.

17 Barbara J. Lippman, "A Heavy Load: The Combined Housing and Transportation Burdens of Working Families," Center for Housing Policy, October 2006. http://www.nhc.org/media/documents/pub_heavy_load_10_06.pdf.

18 U. S. Environmental Protection Agency, "Sources of Greenhouse Gas Emissions." <http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/ghgemissions/sources/transportation.html>.

19 In the last federal transportation bill passed in July 2012, a step was taken to establish people-centered outcomes. The bill, MAP-21, <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/map21/>, establishes for the first time a set of "national goals" for things such as safety and economic vitality, however it stopped short of establishing any kind of penalty if states and regions did not comply. Funders of national transportation reform supported advocacy groups to push for more specific language that included equity, among other things. As the reauthorization of a new transportation bill approaches, adding teeth to the goals in MAP-21, and adding new goals to those that exist, are a priority for advocates. In July 2014, H.R. 5021—Highway and Transportation Funding Act of 2014, a stop-gap bill, was passed, authorizing transportation funding through May 31, 2015. <https://beta.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/5021>.

20 Fixed rail examples include street cars, light rail and bus rapid transit that operates within its own separated lanes.

21 Research from the University of Minnesota's Center for Transportation Studies concludes that transit can play a crucial role in connecting low-wage workers to entry-level jobs. Yingling Fan, "How Light-Rail Transit Improves Job Access for

Low-Wage Workers: A Transitway Impacts Research Program (TIRP) Research Brief," University of Minnesota Center for Transportation Studies, March 2010. <http://www.cts.umn.edu/Publications/ResearchReports/reportdetail.html?id=1900>.

22 This issue is an increasingly strong focus in Denver, where the advocacy organization 9to5 recently documented how high fares undercut workers' ability to get ahead. Monte Whaley, "Advocacy Group 9to5 Blasts RTD for High Fares, Service Cuts, Gentrification," The Denver Post, February 9, 2014. http://www.denverpost.com/commented/ci_25095591?IADID=Search-www.denverpost.com-www.denverpost.com#3302538.

23 "The Hidden Health Costs of Transportation," American Public Health Association, March 2010. <https://www.railstotrails.org/resourcehandler.ashx?id=4546>.

24 The Transit-Oriented Affordable Housing Fund in the San Francisco Bay Area offers low-interest financing for everything from predevelopment costs to construction for land near transit. This fund is a good example of philanthropy leveraging both the public and private sectors: foundations provided half of the pooled money which, in turn, attracted the remaining portion from private investors and the region's metropolitan planning organization. This "blended" fund allows private investors to earn attractive rates of return at acceptable levels of risk because the philanthropic money does not expect to profit from its loan. Denver has a version of such a loan fund, and Seattle is considering one, as well.

25 Mac Daniel, "For the T, Big Net Savings: Repair Foreman Used His Head(Gear) to Fix Costly Problem," Boston.com, May 6, 2006. Subscription required. http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2006/05/04/for_the_t_big_net_savings/.

26 AB 32 is the state's climate change law, which inspired SB 375, since 38 percent of the state's GHGs come from cars and light trucks. SB 375 addresses social equity. CARB convened the Regional Targets Advisory Committee, and part of its charge was to ensure that social equity needs were taken into account in the implementation of SB 375. CARB has just reconstituted a version of the RTAC, and several of the advocates and academics we know have been asked to serve on it.

27 70 percent of the \$40 billion will support public transit. The rest will support other transportation improvements, including highway improvements, etc.

A decorative graphic consisting of a vertical black bar. To its left, a red line extends horizontally from the left edge, then diagonally down to the top of the bar. To its right, three horizontal lines extend to the right edge: a red line at the top, a green line in the middle, and a yellow line at the bottom. From the bottom of the bar, a blue line and a yellow line extend diagonally down to the bottom edge of the page.

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