

Transportation Equity – Says Who?

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The events of the last few years, including the pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the increasingly apparent inequality and issue of homelessness in our society, have shone a spotlight on the issue of equity. But while there is substantial agreement that equity is important— at least in transportation—there is a decided lack of agreement regarding what that means in terms of specific policy outcomes. Equity is in the eye of the beholder.

In a politically driven world of transportation policy, this disagreement leaves substantial vulnerabilities for the idea of equity to be hijacked for political purposes. This superficial theft can happen to such an extreme that those claiming the equity mantle are often advocating for an outcome that may more accurately be characterized as preserving the status quo. This happens even though there is almost universal agreement that the status quo is not equitable.

Having spent the last six years as an executive at LA Metro, I witnessed this issue first-hand. Here are a few examples of where the issue of equity was twisted to the point that decision-makers may have wound up hurting the very people they were allegedly trying to help:

Vermont BRT Corridor. Measure M, the sales tax funding measure that passed in 2016, estimates \$425 million for the Vermont Transit Corridor, with the expectation that this would be a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) service¹. A BRT on Vermont has strong justification in that Vermont is one of the busiest transit corridors in the U.S. and was previously identified by an LA Metro study as an ideal candidate for BRT². LA Metro operates a transit system utilized primarily by low-income people and people of color³, and the Vermont line would traverse almost entirely low-income and minority neighborhoods. The project was identified as part of the “28 by 28” package put together by the mayor⁴, and—unlike many of the other initiatives in that package—was considered realistic to complete in time for the 2028 Summer Olympics.

Unfortunately, the LA Metro Board has acted since that time to delay the project while claiming to be fighting for “equity.” The Board insisted that LA Metro study a subway for the project⁵, and then furthered the supposed need for adding rail to the environmental review as well, adding considerable time and money⁶. Putting aside the added cost for the study, as there is no funding identified for an underground subway that would be far more expensive than a BRT, environmentally clearing a rail project offers little support for the community. Board members made the equity argument in claiming to fight for better transportation for this corridor, even using the fact that this is one of the most heavily traveled corridors as a reason why a subway is needed⁷. Their argument implied that putting in BRT instead of subway would have been inequitable.

The Board's position represents a very narrow view of equity that in practice postpones improvements for those who need them the most. By pushing for a subway and delaying BRT, the Board effectively delayed better transit service for the people in the corridor. Those commuters, currently stuck on a bus in traffic, are typically people without better transportation options who either cannot afford a vehicle, or cannot drive, or both⁸. In seeking to push for a subway, the Board has delayed improvements to their commute. Even putting in simple bus lanes, without a full-blown BRT, could be an easy way to help travelers in the corridor immediately. But the Board has not pushed for that at all. In fact, the Board encouraged staff to cancel a recent procurement for the study of bus and rail in the corridor due to the perceived need for greater community engagement, delaying the study and the project even further⁹.

There are charitable and non-charitable explanations for the Board's behavior on this issue. The charitable explanation is that they feel this corridor should get a subway and believe they are standing up for the right thing, even if it is unrealistic¹⁰. A less charitable explanation is that they know how difficult it would be to secure bus lanes in this corridor, as relatively wealthier and whiter merchants and drivers would fight against the loss of a lane for private vehicles as they have in other communities¹¹. Rather than engage in that politically bruising battle, they can advocate for a subway and look like they are doing something right for this area. Regardless of the reasons, it is worth raising the question of who benefits from these policy decisions—is it the same people the Board is claiming to be helping?

Traffic Reduction Study (congestion pricing). The idea of using congestion pricing as a mechanism for fighting traffic in Los Angeles has been around for a long time¹², but it gained serious traction at LA Metro when it was included in the Vision 2028 Strategic Plan, which the Board approved in 2018¹³. It was further elevated when the LA Metro Board pressured staff to identify funding to accelerate the projects in the 28 by 28 plan¹⁴. Seizing an opportunity, CEO Phil Washington identified congestion pricing as a mechanism that could not only raise the revenue, but also reduce traffic and potentially provide for free transit. The Board found itself approving the idea of studying congestion pricing, which led to LA Metro's Traffic Reduction Study (TRS)¹⁵.

TRS is looking at four possible areas for piloting congestion pricing in Los Angeles County¹⁶. In each of these highly congested areas, the idea would be to price the roads by time of day in order to reduce traffic. The revenue from road pricing would then be used to invest in alternatives to driving such as mass transit, bike and pedestrian rights of way, carpooling options, and even telecommuting.

While the Board has permitted the study to continue, they have consistently raised the issue of equity with respect to congestion pricing as being their biggest cause for concern¹⁷. As typically framed by Board members, the equity issue applies because there are low-income workers who have no choice but to drive at peak times who would now find themselves paying a higher cost for this trip. The cliché example often provided by this line of exposition is that of the “gardener” or other blue-collar worker who has a truck full of tools and could not possibly use mass transit¹⁸.

There is a real issue of concern here in that there will be people who depend on driving during peak times for their livelihoods who, under a congestion pricing scheme, might have no good alternative and could wind up paying out-of-pocket costs that are far more than what they pay now. In some cases, these drivers could be low-income people already living under very tight budget circumstances, who will now find themselves in a deeper financial hole. This issue could be

resolved with subsidies provided to low-income drivers, but the fact that there might be a solution doesn't mean that it isn't worth raising an issue.

However, this issue is not the same as the broader issue of “equity” in congestion pricing. By raising this as an “equity” issue, Board members and others often ignore the substantial equity improvements that could come from pricing the roads. Because roads are not currently priced, people in buses—the ultimate energy and money-saving carpool—are sitting in traffic caused largely by people in single-occupancy-vehicles. Road pricing is intended to reduce the number of cars traveling at peak times, thus allowing buses, which carry predominantly low-income people of color¹⁹, with high ridership during peak times, to move much faster. Moreover, road pricing would allow traffic to move faster and idle less on freeways, thus reducing pollution in areas near freeways, which tend to be largely low-income and minority neighborhoods²⁰.

Perhaps most critically, Board members who claim to be embracing a progressive agenda, wherein inequality is reduced by having the wealthy pay more to improve the lives of the poor, ignore the fact that congestion pricing would essentially be a massive wealth transfer from higher-income people to lower-income people. By tolling the roads during peak times and using those revenues for mass transit and other non-driving alternatives, which are dominated by low-income users, one could argue that congestion pricing in Los Angeles is a socialist-equity-fantasy.

The fact that elected officials tend to focus on this small potential equity challenge and ignore the substantial potential equity benefits could be charitably interpreted as looking out for those who will be negatively impacted by the idea. A more cynical interpretation is that elected officials get more political capital from raising concerns about equity than they do from embracing a controversial policy that brings equity benefits, as happened in New York²¹. Regardless of the motivation, the effect is the same—issues of equity in congestion pricing are often distilled into the simplistic view that pricing is bad for equity. This distillation may effectively help prevent some actual beneficial equity outcomes such as improved mass transit and reduced pollution near freeways.

Bus Operations. There is a growing recognition, at least rhetorically, of the need to improve bus operations at LA Metro and potential resulting equity benefits. This rhetoric comes from the Board, CEO, staff, and advocates. The general thinking is as follows: most transit riders in LA are on buses, most of them are low-income and minority individuals, and in general they face long and often unreliable commutes. Improvements in bus service can help reduce the gap between those who own cars and those who do not by empowering everyone to meet their basic travel needs.

This rhetoric was put into action when the Board compelled LA Metro to restore bus service to pre-pandemic levels well before the pandemic was coming to an end²². The idea expressed by the Board was that low-frequency service was not only inadequate for those who depend on the service but was also unlikely to attract riders back when the pandemic ended. While LA Metro staff had recommended restoring service as demand returned, the Board pushed for and successfully forced the restoration of service levels prior to increased demand. Their argument was, in part, based on equity²³. Their concern was for essential workers, with no choice but to use transit, who might find themselves facing long wait times due to reduced service. The Board chose to focus on the total hours of service as the metric for whether LA Metro was effectively serving these customers. They were, in effect, defining equity in this case as putting out a specific amount of bus service.

A more comprehensive view of equity here would consider the broader problems with bus service. While the total amount of service hours is certainly a relevant metric, there are many other criteria that are perhaps even more important. For example, even worse than low-frequency service for riders is cancelled service, so the board could have used that metric. Another potential set of criteria is service speed and reliability, which are of great importance to riders. Finally, there is the issue of security on buses, which riders have consistently expressed as a concern²⁴.

Had they chosen these metrics instead of the blunt instrument of service hours, the Board might have pushed staff (and the areas and governments they represent) to offer hiring incentives to ensure adequate bus operators (as Metro later did²⁵). They might have wound up pushing for more exclusive bus lanes to bypass traffic. And they could have used some of the funds intended for additional bus service to ensure better security on existing services.

But instead, the Board pushed exclusively for more service hours. The results were predictable—cancelled routes due to driver shortages, slower service as traffic returned, and no substantial ridership increases²⁶. A generous view of the Board’s interpretation of equity in this case is that they really believed service hours was the appropriate metric and did not have the time or inclination to take a more nuanced view. A less generous and perhaps more accurate interpretation is that they were responding to pressure from advocacy groups rather than looking for the best solution, and that exclusive bus lanes and security are thornier political issues that the Board did not want to wade into.

Conclusions

Equity is a complex issue and there is no “correct” understanding that can guide us through challenging policy decisions. In the absence of a clear definition, it is no surprise to see various interests—including but not limited to those of elected officials—use the term to advance their preferred agenda. However, it is critical that we turn a skeptical eye towards assertions of equity improvements or challenges, especially when there is reason to believe that the outcome may be the opposite of what is being claimed.

Exclusive bus lanes and congestion pricing remain two of the most cost-effective ways to approach urban mobility challenges. Both ideas face daunting political challenges, as they typically force those who have something—a lane of traffic they can drive in or a road they can use for free—to give those things up in return for a set of benefits that can seem abstract. But we should be careful not to confuse something being politically challenging with being inequitable, even if it might be convenient for elected officials to do so. These strategies can be viewed as a way to wrestle something away from wealthier drivers and use it to provide benefits to low-income transit riders. The more we can call out the equity benefits of these types of initiatives, and push back on the claims of inequity, the more likely they are to succeed.

Endnotes

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