Driving Deeper into the Climate Crisis: Who Gets Priority on Our Streets?

Bus

Active Transportation

Cars

Autonomous Vehicles
Table of Contents

Overview 3
How Did We Get Here? 4
Where Are We Going? 5
Policy Framework and Solutions 6
   I. Revenue 6
   II. Regulation 7
   III. Right of Way 8
Endnotes 9

Published by: Urban Habitat

Urban Habitat works to democratize power and advance equitable policies to create a just and connected Bay Area for low-income communities and communities of color. We confront structural inequities impacting historically disenfranchised communities by bringing a race and class lens to the forefront of transportation, land use, and housing policies.

Author:
Bob Allen, Director of Policy and Advocacy Campaigns

Acknowledgements:
Annie Sajid, former Communications and Grants Manager
Overview

The Bay Area’s transportation sector accounts for the largest share of the region’s greenhouse gas emissions (40%)\(^1\), which means that reducing driving is a key strategy for dealing with the climate crisis. Yet transit ridership throughout California is either flat or falling, while vehicle ownership is increasing in many parts of the state, including among low-income communities.\(^2\) An increasing body of evidence shows that private Transportation Network Companies (TNCs) such as Uber and Lyft are either shifting transit riders into cars or inducing new car trips\(^3\) and ultimately increasing greenhouse gas emissions. TNCs, and the cars they use, are often most active in dense urban areas where they increase congestion\(^4\), slow public transit, and contribute to an increasingly segregated transportation system.

However, current policy and political debates over the future of transportation too often focus on the promised solutions of new technology, including the rise of autonomous vehicles and the proliferation of TNCs as well other private mobility companies. We must confront the fact that the automobile is reemerging as the fundamental organizing principle of our transportation system and culture. Instead, we continue to ignore the history and impacts of building communities that serve cars, not people, and expect this false solution to address the climate crisis, when in reality it plays a major role in exacerbating it. This brief attempts to:

- Reframe these debates and provide a broad set of solutions, some of which are already underway, to take control of our streets for public good over private profit;
- Fund investments in innovative and sustainable public transit, and;
- Create a transportation system that works for the many who rely on it, not the few who view transportation as a private service.
With the creation of American suburbs in the decades following World War II, public transportation confronted a series of structural barriers that reflected many of the racial disparities in emerging metropolitan regions. These included the massive investment in state and interstate highway systems, patterns of racially exclusionary housing policy, and the increasing use of urban planning and zoning laws to further embed sprawl and segregation. In many regards, sprawl, modern segregation, and the climate crisis share common roots in the production of the suburbs.

The urban planning axiom that public transit alone cannot fix decades of poor land use planning that privileges cars over communities, nor racially exclusionary housing policies, remains true.

Transit-oriented development promised to help California achieve our regional and state climate goals, but it has been undermined by the lack of affordable housing, an increasingly fragmented transportation landscape, and the displacement of transit-dependent residents to the suburbs. Increasingly, patterns of regional resegregation are creating new challenges, such as how to provide transit service to suburban communities where communities of color and low-income communities continue to be displaced. What’s more, almost 80% of all federal transportation dollars are still spent on highways, while the remaining 20% is dedicated overwhelmingly to capital and maintenance for mass transit. As a consequence, transit operators struggle to raise funds to operate and expand service on the streets.
Public transportation in the Bay Area must counter a legacy of racial and economic inequality, while also addressing a new set of challenges that are shaping the politics and economics of diverse communities throughout the region. These challenges include privatization, fragmentation, and, in the not-too-distant future, pressure for the partial automation of the transportation system, including public transit. We have already seen privatization in the form of corporate transit services such as Chariot. Fragmentation occurs not only in the form of the more than twenty public transit operators in the Bay Area, but also in the cultural shift away from transit as public good accessible across the commons and towards a “system” of individual transportation apps. Finally, the shift towards driverless public transit, which promises more service for less public funding, reflects the contemporary political era of distrust and disinvestment in public goods and services.

These developments, along with plans for corporate subscriptions to autonomous car services that intend to replace private car ownership, will likely create race- and class-based disparities in access to such services while increasing driving and greenhouse gas emissions. Ultimately, public policy solutions generated through Silicon Valley’s political lens threaten to erode a common agenda of democratic community planning and public transit as the foundation for an equitable Bay Area.
The Bay Area needs an ambitious policy and investment agenda that emphasizes public over private solutions, funds community-identified transportation needs over corporate experiments in mobility services, and prioritizes residents’ right to the city and its streets for public transit, walking, and biking. This agenda would both counter historical inequities and challenge emergent disparities. Key components of this policy and investment agenda are described below.

I. Revenue from progressive funding sources tied to the transportation impacts of market-rate and commercial development and that mitigate the impacts of such development, as well as revenue from the proliferation of private transportation services. Examples of such revenue sources include:

- Levy a tax on platform or “gig” economy companies, as outlined in the recommendations from the San Francisco Transportation Task Force 2045;

- Implement a congestion fee on Transportation Network Companies (TNCs), such as Uber and Lyft, and private shuttle services, such as Chariot;

- Explore “congestion zones” in areas, such as downtown San Francisco, while providing sufficient exemptions for low-income communities, residents, and local businesses who need continued access to these areas;

- Create and invest in a “public transit innovation fund” that supports public, micro-transit pilot projects that leverage on-demand and other
II. Regulation that addresses the problems caused by significant increases in car traffic and trips, which are induced by market-rate housing development, commercial office expansion, and TNCs/private transportation services. Raising new revenue is necessary but insufficient unless we also:

- Secure local regulatory authority from the California Public Utilities Commission to develop a locally-appropriate framework to manage traffic and vehicles on our streets;
- Enforce a flexible “cap” to limit the number of TNCs;
- Ensure that TNCs and private transportation platforms and services are accessible to all Bay Area residents, regardless of race, class, and geography;
- Proactively develop a policy framework and vision to meaningfully debate the introduction, management, and potential integration of autonomous vehicles into the Bay Area’s transportation network as well ensure equitable access to these services for all communities; and
- Democratize data, so that public agencies and communities have access to the information necessary to plan for people, not private profit.

- Condition transportation funds to reward jurisdictions that take on their fair share of affordable housing, which underscores the linkage between transportation investments and equitable land use and housing policies; and
- Dedicate a portion of new local and regional transportation revenue to a “community stabilization fund” that supports strategies to protect tenants through policies such as “no net loss” provisions and the right to legal counsel.

Technologies to provide a range of new public transit options for neighborhoods with limited service, including first and last mile connections and improved paratransit and senior transportation services;
III. Right of Way that prioritizes access to our city streets for all residents of differing abilities through public transit, walking, biking, and driving, when necessary, for local residents. Instead of continuing to build infrastructure that serves cars and corporations first and people second, we need an interconnected network of streets where we:

- Address the climate crisis and move more people reliably and safely with transit-priority lanes and car-free zones that are locally appropriate and that are planned and developed with early and meaningful input from neighborhoods and grassroots, community-based organizations;
- Enforce existing laws that are supposed to ensure that TNCs and private transportation services do not travel in transit-priority lanes, park in loading and no parking zones, or utilize bus stops, all of which significantly slow down transit for all residents;
- Prioritize public space such as curb space and parking for people – not for unregulated start-ups, scooters, and robots;
- Ensure that all new streets are “complete streets” that support pedestrian safety and accessibility for all residents, including seniors and people with disabilities; and fund bicycle safety and network expansion plans.
Endnotes

1. Bay Area Emissions Inventory Summary Report for Greenhouse Gases: Base Year 2011
   http://www.baaqmd.gov/~/media/Files/Planning%20and%20Research/Emission%20Inventory/BY2011_GHGSummary.ashx?la=en

2. Falling Transit Ridership: California and Southern California

3. Disruptive Transportation: The Adoption, Utilization, and Impacts of Ride-Hailing in the United States
   https://its.ucdavis.edu/research/publications/

4. TNCs Today A Profile of San Francisco Transportation Network Company Activity
   https://www.sfcta.org/sites/default/files/content/Planning/TNCs/TNCs_Today_112917.pdf

5. Race, Inequality, and the Resegregation of the Bay Area

6. San Francisco Transportation Task Force 2045
   http://www.sftransportation2045.com