

KEYNOTE DINNER ADDRESS

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Social Justice and Ecological Sustainability: Issues and Opportunities for Metropolitan Transportation Planning

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I would like to thank the Transportation Research Board and the Conference Steering Committee for inviting me to speak to you this evening. I hope that my comments will help stimulate the discussion in the workshop sessions later in the conference. The metropolitan transportation planning process includes a variety of complex issues and challenges. I would like to acknowledge the important role all groups play in ensuring the success of this planning process.

The Earth Island Institute is an international environmental organization that was founded about 10 years ago by David Brower, then the Executive Director of the Sierra Club. It is an umbrella organization for over 30 different autonomous projects addressing environmental issues around the world. The projects undertaken by the Institute range from species protection to maintaining the integrity of sacred lands to eco-system protection. I am the Associate Director of the Urban Habitat Program (UHP) which was founded by Carl Anthony, an architect, urban planner and long-time social and environmental justice activist. This program focuses on urban environmental issues and includes developing and nurturing multi-cultural environmental leadership and creating socially just and ecologically sustainable communities in the San Francisco Bay Area.

One project I am currently working on deals with social and ecological justice related to transportation improvements. This project includes working with the African-American and Asian communities in the San Francisco area to plan and implement public transportation

improvements. We have been facilitating a community based planning process. This process has included working to foster a collaborative partnership with local organizations and individuals in looking at light rail transit (LRT) improvements in the Bayshore corridor. San Francisco has an extensive LRT system, and the community feels that it has been woefully under served for a number of years. The UHP is examining the opportunities to link transportation planning to economic development, which is a very high priority in this community. We are also assessing how public transportation can be used to address and to deal with land use conflicts, energy efficiency, and environmental protection, as well as improving air quality and the overall social, economic, and environmental quality of life.

At the regional level, the UHP is pursuing a number of initiatives. One is monitoring, evaluating, and critiquing the Oakland Bay Bridge Congestion Pricing Demonstration Project from a social and environmental justice perspective. This project represents one of the first national congestion pricing demonstration projects. As part of this effort, we are developing a framework and a methodology for addressing social, economic, and environmental impacts of various market-based transportation control measures.

Over the last year, the UHP has also been exploring the opportunity to develop a region-wide effort to articulate a vision for the Bay Area. This process would include community groups, transit workers, environmentalists, and individuals in a broad based effort to assess the role transportation, including public transit, can play in meeting the social, economic, and environmental needs of the Bay Area's population. We have been working with numerous groups to ensure that this process would include both the urban core communities and the less densely populated suburban areas.

The UHP is also engaged in a number of national activities. We often work with other groups and coalitions, such as the Surface Transportation Policy Project (STPP) and the Energy and Equity Roundtable, in these efforts. Further, the UHP has actively participated in a number of recent national transportation conferences.

I will address a number of points this evening. First, I will discuss some of the issues related to the roles and responsibilities of MPOs and the institutional aspects of the metropolitan transportation planning process. Second, I will identify some key concerns and opportunities facing the transportation planning process and the consideration of environmental justice transportation issues. Finally, I

will conclude with a few suggestions on how we can work together to address these challenges.

As you are well aware, transportation is a critical element to healthy, livable, and sustainable urban and rural communities. Transportation is also directly related to other social, environmental, and economic issues. The transportation system influences economic development, land use patterns, real estate investment decisions, and energy efficiency and conservation. Transportation influences our energy consumption levels. The current reliance on the automobile as our major mode of transportation does not help support sustainable communities. Transportation objectives need to be tied closer to social, environmental, and economic objectives. The transportation system does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it is intertwined with other policy issues.

Although most of my comments will focus on the issues, challenges, and opportunities related to the urban transportation system, it is also important to examine the needs of rural communities and rural transportation issues. In addition, the relationship of urban, suburban, and rural communities, including Native American tribal communities which have their own set of unique transportation issues, should be assessed. It is also important to examine the capacity of MPOs to develop plans which adequately address metropolitan mobility needs and to consider the institutional relationships needed to advance solutions that are socially just and ecologically sustainable.

Over the last few months there have been two national conferences on environmental justice and transportation. One of these was held last week in Atlanta, Georgia. It was sponsored by the FHWA, the FTA, and the Federal Railroad Administration. The conference was hosted by the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University. This conference brought together representatives from states, MPOs, and local governments, along with community groups and environmentalists, academics, and consultants to listen to the perspectives of people who often do not have a voice in the transportation decision-making process, but who are affected by these decisions. Part of the context for both conferences grew out of an Executive Order signed by President Clinton on environmental justice. This order included a mandate to federal agencies, such as the Department of Transportation, to develop strategies to address environmental justice issues. The Department is currently formulating a response to this directive.

In November of 1994, a conference was held in Chicago on transportation, environmental justice, and social equity. This conference was sponsored by the FHWA, the FTA, and the STPP. These two conferences helped to identify the key issues and approaches that could

be used to address concerns related to social and environmental justice.

One historical focus of environmental justice issues is public health. Concerns over air pollution, especially in communities of color and poorer communities is a major issue. These community health problems are also environmental health issues that relate to how we use, consume, and waste environmental resources. For example, air pollution caused by congestion on freeways cutting through inner city neighborhoods negatively impact those residents.

The transportation system influences other environmental factors. One of the major sources of water pollution in the San Francisco Bay Area is runoff from motor vehicles on the freeway and road networks. The reliance on the automobile also means a reliance on fossil fuels, which is an unrenueable, unsustainable energy source. Automobiles are also the largest contributing factor to ground level ozone, which contributes to global warming. Some people will take issue with the seriousness of the erosion of the ozone layer. I think there is compelling evidence that indicates that this is a major and an increasingly threatening problem to the earth, and to all things that live, breath, and sustain life on earth, including human beings.

Other environmental dimensions that are influenced by transportation policy include the degradation of open space and agricultural land, and continued urban sprawl. Economic and social justice transportation issues include the mismatch between jobs and economic opportunities, housing, medical services, educational facilities, and other human service needs. The transportation system influences where people live and where they work. The continuing movement of jobs to suburban and exurban areas has had a negative impact on people who do not have access to an automobile.

Many metropolitan areas are comprised of the urban core, a first ring of older suburbs, and an ever expanding outer ring of developing suburbs and edge cities. A number of the speakers this afternoon talked about the challenges presented by these development patterns. These include the debt servicing on infrastructure elements, the erosion of the central city tax base, the decaying and abandonment of the urban inner core, and the attendant resource needs and consumption to duplicate that infrastructure further and further out. I would propose that this approach is not sustainable over the long term.

Some people have suggested that the community disruption caused by the construction of the freeway system has, in some cases, resulted in transportation apartheid. At the conference last week in Georgia, one man spoke about how people who are transit dependant

and live in the central part of a small community are literally segregated by the transportation system. They are cut off from access to suburban job centers, to suburban health care, and to suburban recreational opportunities. As a result, the transportation investment decisions contribute to segregation. There is an increasing race and class stratification in many urban areas because of real estate investment and land use patterns that create and encourage urban sprawl. The disproportionate emphasis on the automobile, roads, freeways, and parking facilities has resulted in real injustices and inequities in transportation investments and in the transportation infrastructure.

Transit is often considered a second class citizen compared to the single occupant vehicle. It is the step-child of the automobile and the road network in most places. The current automobile oriented system is inadequate to meet the transportation needs of nearly 50 percent of the population who are either too old, too young, too poor, disabled, or who choose not to drive. People like myself, who choose not to drive, make up a significant portion of Americans. When you consider the fact that 75 percent of the population lives in major metropolitan regions, and that anywhere from 30 to 50 percent of these people are not able to drive for one reason or another, it tells you something about our current priorities. There appears to be a disconnection between meeting the transportation needs of all the segments of the population and the infrastructure investments that are currently being made.

This disconnection has tremendous impacts on urban and rural communities in terms of access and mobility, and in terms of the social and economic fabric of our society. The negative impacts include isolation, lack of job opportunities and access to employment, and the ability for individual development and growth. Although these are difficult issues to discuss, they must be addressed if we are to meet the goal of sustainable communities. In many respects, the current transportation system does not serve the needs of a substantial portion of Americans.

Because these needs are not being met for a substantial portion of the population, I would suggest that the current system is ultimately not sustainable. The discussion this afternoon about the existing political climate and the Congressional budget process lends even greater importance to these issues. We need to examine how we improve the existing system to ensure that it serves everyone. In this regard, the transportation system should provide a range of options for single occupant vehicles, transit users, bicyclists, and pedestrians. Our challenge is to make the system socially just and ecologically sustainable.

I think we have an opportunity to meet this challenge. The ISTEA represents an important part of the approach that will be needed to accomplish our goals. As acknowledged by the speakers this afternoon, the ISTEA is not perfect, but it provides an opportunity to begin to address many critical issues facing our metropolitan areas. One area for possible improvement is the development of a process that is principled, that provides a shared language, and that provides a framework that considers cultural values and the principles of social justice and ecological sustainability.

I would like to define social justice and ecological sustainability. First, there are seventeen principles of environmental justice, which were adopted at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. This Summit took place in October of 1991, in Washington, D.C. I will not go over all of these principles, but they provide a basis for the development of a shared language, a common framework, and a cultural value system that can be used in the transportation planning process.

Social justice, which I distinguish from social equity, focuses on meeting basic needs of individuals in a fair and equitable way. Social justice also demands that institutions be accessible, responsible, and accountable to all people and groups regardless of social or economic standing.

Ecological sustainability is based on the principles of ecology, which recognize the interrelationship of all living things. Ecosystems are living systems. They are a complex web of relationships among species and habitats, the natural world and human world, and the diversity that exists within the human community. That diversity is the strength of any ecosystem. The long-term survivability of any species in an ecosystem depends on a limited resource base. A sustainable society is one that is able to satisfy its needs while maintaining its natural resources and life support systems. The more diverse the system, the more alternative relationships are available when the other parts break down.

America is a very diverse society. This is true not only in places like San Francisco, which is an international crossroads, but in communities throughout the country. Increasingly, the fabric of society is changing. If we deny this change or if we let it become a barrier to communicating and understanding one another, we will have serious problems. The issues of diversity are important to public policies, including transportation, and to how priorities are established. When social justice is put together with ecological sustainability, we have a definition of socially just and ecologically sustainable communities.

This kind of principle should be at the heart of

transportation planning. The work the UHP is doing in the Bay Shore Corridor in San Francisco provides one example of how this can be accomplished in the context of transportation policy and planning. A community partnership was established to develop a very extensive transportation plan. With the assistance of professional transportation planners, a set of transportation planning principles was established. These principles were that transportation is a social investment affecting the social, economic, and environmental quality of life in urban communities; that transportation projects should be used to reshape rather than reinforce inefficient urban land use and reduce rather than exacerbate adverse environmental impacts and wasted resources; that transportation planning should be conducted in full partnership with community groups using a bottom-up approach; and that transportation investment decisions should result from an integrated transportation land use, economic development, and environmental planning process. The ISTEA helps provide the context for the inclusion of these factors in the transportation planning process. It also provides the opportunity to develop real collaborative processes and partnerships.

Although public participation programs have been enhanced in many areas as the result of the ISTEA, improvements are still needed. It is important to realize that there are many diverse groups and individuals that need to be involved in the transportation planning process. Ensuring that the public is defined for each project is critical.

It is important to remember that transportation decisions are ultimately political decisions. We need to address both the short-term political issues, such as the current Congressional budget debate, and the longer-term political issues. It is important to keep a long term perspective, even when dealing with immediate problems.

We also tend to focus on the symptoms of an unsustainable transportation system, rather than on the underlying causes of the disease and the disfunction. It is important to address the causes of the present problems if we hope to really overcome them. There is also a

tendency to focus more on social equity than on social justice. To ensure social justice we must make sure that all groups and individuals have access to institutions, and that these institutions are accountable and responsible.

I would like to suggest a standard of sustainability for the transportation system. If we meet the transportation needs of those most vulnerable in our society—the young, the old, the poor, the disabled, and the transportation disadvantaged—we meet the basic needs of everyone. I do not think our current system meets the basic needs of these individuals. Creating this baseline threshold should be given a high priority as the way to develop an truly sustainable transportation system. The development of a system wide performance standard to measure the baseline conditions will be needed to help ensure these needs are met.

I would also suggest that we need to embrace the public participation process and make it work to ensure that the best decisions are being made for all groups in society. A good public participation program can help enhance the credibility of public agencies. MPOs can serve an important function to help improve the public participation process and the transportation planning process. Providing opportunities for the interaction of broad based public sector groups and decision makers is one way this can happen.

In summary, working in a true partnership, a public participation program based on the principles of environmental justice will help ensure a sustainable transportation system. As we move forward in this effort it is important to remember the interrelationship of the transportation system with the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of our communities. We also need to understand how all issues, challenges, and opportunities effect different groups of people in various communities.

I hope I have provided a few ideas for you to think about in your discussion over the next few days. I look forward to participating in the workshops and to discussing important issues and opportunities with you.