

**LEGISLATIVE BRIEFING ON THE SPECIAL SESSION ON TRANSPORTATION:  
EQUITY AND CLIMATE IMPACTS**  
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The majority of Californians are people of color, low-income people, or both. For that majority, three of the top transportation priorities are operating more transit service; reducing fares; and making active transportation improvements. These are also priorities for climate protection. Yet California's transportation funding system is skewed away from these three priorities.

To frame the context for these priorities, I'll first say a few words about what equity in transportation means, and then point out some of the ways in which low-income communities and residents of color have transportation needs that are very different from those of others.

**First, what is transportation equity?**

Equity is often mystified and misunderstood. We tend to think that any investment we make within an underserved community is a benefit for low-income residents and people of color. But history demonstrates otherwise: low-income communities of color were devastated by the federal highway program. Yet we have continued, up to the present, to invest in infrastructure that disrupts low-income communities while bringing mobility benefits to others.

*Equity in transportation is about more than location: it's about ensuring that public investment meets the pressing needs of underserved residents.*

That standard is now enshrined in guidance adopted by the California Air Resources Board on the Cap and Trade set-aside for benefitting disadvantaged communities: to count toward the requirements of Senator De León's bill, SB 535, an investment must "meaningfully address an important community need," and "avoid substantial burdens," such as displacement or health risks.

**How are the transportation needs of underserved residents different?**

For one thing, low-income families own fewer cars, and many are completely dependent on transit. Low-income people also tend to take shorter trips. For instance, low-income households who do own a car drive much less – a third fewer miles for a household with \$20,000 in income than for a household earning \$80,000.

Those differences are not just based on low-income income status but also extend to people of color. For instance, Latinos of all incomes ride transit to work at twice the rate that whites do. And this majority of Californians depends on transit to get to many places besides work. They rely on shorter trips on local transit to get to schools and colleges, to health care and public services, and to the grocery store.

Finally, both low-income people and people of color are more likely to depend on the local bus for most of their trips than on long-haul commuter rail systems with higher fares. That's because of both the shorter trips they take and their limited incomes. Not only that, but a lot of the capital funding sources are further restricted to building new infrastructure, rather than maintaining and operating what we already have. That good stewardship of existing infrastructure, or "fix-it-first," should be at the heart of nearly all our investments, but it's not.

These fundamental differences in travel needs mean that underserved residents get far less benefit from most of our transportation spending than other residents do. Why? Because most of our transportation spending is restricted to capital uses. And the biggest beneficiaries of a lot of the capital projects we fund are either those who drive the most, or those who ride capital-intensive transit, like commuter rail. Low-income people, as I've said, drive much less, and they rely disproportionately on local transit service, not on deluxe rail service.

That brings me back to the three priorities I started out by mentioning: **transit operating subsidies; transit fare reduction programs; and active transportation improvements.**

Unlike capital investments, **operating investments**, the first priority, are what makes transit run. Operating revenues pay driver and mechanic salaries, fuel costs, and preventive maintenance. Deluxe transit systems can cover more of their operating needs at the fare box, because their riders are more affluent. But local transit systems have only two choices when we under-fund operations: cut service, and raise fares. Unfortunately, we see a lot of both.

Operating service is a key component of a "fix-it-first" strategy. The Low Carbon Transit Operating Program was a step in the right direction, but it's dismaying that this year's budget proposal includes no new money for transit operations, which should be the first priority.

The second priority is **free transit passes**. Local bus fares are too high all over the state. That drives down ridership. And conversely, reducing fares has been shown to have a dramatic effect on increasing ridership. For instance, Los Angeles County Metro's ridership increased 35% during the ten year period after a civil rights consent decree made fares more affordable. This, by the way, is just one example of how we all benefit when the needs of underserved communities are met. Increased transit ridership benefits drivers, and the planet as a whole.

The third priority is **active transportation improvements**. The main beneficiaries of most of our street and road investments today are still motorists. Not only that, but the burdens of auto travel continue to fall heavily on underserved residents, bringing negative health impacts while restricting healthy transportation options like walking and biking.

So I'll end with the same note I began on. The old paradigm is investing in infrastructure that disrupts low-income communities while bringing mobility benefits to others. Today, we need a new paradigm in which the transportation, mobility and health needs of underserved residents are getting a fair share of the funding.

As the discussion of the Governor's transportation package proceeds, let's be sure that it is rounded out to include the needs of the majority of Californians who, today, are largely left out.