Open Letter: Investing in Multimodal Transportation

Dear Philanthropic Community:

We share your commitment to tackling the climate crisis and promoting racial justice. We believe that multimodal transportation is key to advancing these crucial goals. Yet, despite the fact that transportation accounts for the greatest share of greenhouse gas emissions in the U.S., transportation is vastly underfunded in climate philanthropy (accounting for less than 10 percent of climate funding), and the frontline organizations fighting for a just, multimodal future are campaigning on shoestring budgets.

We urge leaders in climate funding to invest in community-based groups who fight for better transportation. We further urge leaders in funding of electric vehicles to make supplementary investments in civic advocacy for public transit and other alternative climate-friendly modes of transportation. We urge leaders to boost the sum total of transportation investments. Specifically, we believe an additional investment of $200 million in transportation organizing is needed to transform the way Americans move, replacing our dependence on highways and roads with an approach to transportation and land use that includes transit, electric trucks and cars, biking, walking, and more.

Public transit is often overlooked as a means for tackling climate change and promoting racial equity. This is a grave mistake. Buses and trains provide mobility across race and class, to people in rural and urban communities alike, and to seniors and people with disabilities. Paired with biking and walking, transit reduces sprawl, improves health, and lowers transportation expenses.

Meanwhile, highway construction and widening continue at a breakneck pace, despite the extreme environmental costs and the catastrophe that highways have long represented for communities of color. Perversely, highway widening has been promoted as a means of reducing congestion and carbon emissions though it does the opposite and even though highway projects continue to harm communities of color. The $135 billion allocated for 58 major highway expansion projects since 2014 could have funded more than 250,000 electric buses.

Every five years Congress reconsiders transportation priorities. We must do two things between now and the next reauthorization: we must not only shape a better context for the 2026 legislation, but we must also influence the implementation of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) to ensure that we make progress on climate and equity rather than move backward. Successfully influencing implementation of the IIJA, in turn, will help us build power and momentum towards a better reauthorization in 2026. This requires effective grassroots pressure, and creating that pressure requires robust collaboration from philanthropy.

Philanthropy can help unlock the latent power of riders by supporting the frontline organizations that are building a social justice movement for multimodal transportation and transit-oriented development. We've already seen the difference this untapped constituency can make. The examples below show effective community-based advocacy is essential to winning less carbon-intensive infrastructure investments:

- In the Seattle region, a broad network of groups organized by the Transportation Choices Coalition led to creation and passage of a ballot measure that raised $54 billion in new revenues for a vast expansion of the light rail and bus systems.

- In Houston, the Texas Department of Transportations threatens to destroy over a thousand homes and businesses in low-income neighborhoods of color. With its partners, the civic group LINK Houston, funded by philanthropy, organized the opposition and currently has prevailed on the U.S. DOT to temporarily pause the project due to its likely civil rights violations.

- In New York City, a diversity of groups originally convened under the initiative of Mayor Michael Bloomberg pressed the legislature for years to adopt decongestion pricing, which will reduce emissions and generate $1 billion per year for transit improvements. Local foundations funded the Riders Alliance and others to accomplish this victory.

- In Los Angeles, bus riders are predominantly low-income people of color, and many are “essential workers,” yet at the height of COVID LA Metro proposed disproportionate cuts interfering with their ability to get to work. Civic groups including ACT LA, Investing in Place, and Move LA, pressured the LA Metro board to restore service that was fairer and more responsive to need.

Organizations like these took a tremendous leap amid the pandemic, campaigning in coordination for the first time to win historic federal investment in transit. Specifically, the American Rescue Plan and Build Back Better Act deliver federal operating assistance for transit for the first time, and the IIJA includes an unprecedented $107 billion in transit funding. Yet, the groups fell short of stopping the IIJA’s increased highway funding, and failed to achieve the transformational goals of ending the 80/20 spending split and securing significant new investments to allow more people to move out of cars.

Undeterred, these groups are now focusing on local, regional and statewide agencies, advocating for federal dollars to be used to improve transit service, stop highway expansions, and build better places to walk and bike, particularly in frontline communities. In the process, these organizations are honing the advocacy muscle necessary to fundamentally restructure our transportation priorities. These efforts should command the full backing of philanthropy. Instead, organizers and grassroots leaders are winning what they can with extremely limited resources.

A $200 million philanthropic investment over the next five years would empower local groups to build a robust, coordinated field to win local battles, direct the coming surge of federal funding and prepare for reauthorization. With this funding, frontline organizations will reduce greenhouse gasses in their communities and be ready to win a transformational reauthorization fight in 2026.

Funding local and regional organizing for multimodal transportation is crucial to achieve our shared goals of climate justice and racial equity. We look forward to collaborating with you to build a more sustainable and equitable future.

Sincerely,

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*Organization for identification purposes only
(Organizations can add their name to the letter with this form)

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