



Transit Workers and Environmentalists Join Forces

By Luz DeVerano Cervantes

Traditionally, labor unions and environmentalists have fought over issues such as urban development vs. growth management, or natural resource extraction vs. preservation. But the lean and mean '90s, which are becoming characterized by a growing tendency to privatize public services and roll back environmental protections, makes this a decade to recast our alliances.

For the past two years, I have been participating in exploratory meetings between the Coordinating Council of Bay Area Transit Workers Unions (Coordinating Council) and some of the Bay Area's environmental organizations.* Overall, the group found that there were many opportunities to work together and good reason to move forward. One of the first projects for the group was a jointly crafted vision statement on public transportation. Based on the vision statement the group has begun to identify strategic areas of reform and some general objectives for addressing those targets.

(For additional details and the complete article, see *RP&E*, Fall 1995 at www.urbanhabitat.org/20years/95.)

The Vision Statement

Transportation in the San Francisco Bay Area is a significant element in the formation of regional vitality and solidarity. One important aspect of transportation, regardless of its mode, is its capacity to unify or fragmentize communities through accessibility. The existing and future public transportation system must provide that access, and by its nature it must play an integral part in the building of sustainable communities in the Bay Area. Public mass transit is a critical link to reducing wasteful suburban sprawl, increasing socially just urban infill development, reducing reliance on automo-

biles, improving energy efficiency in transportation, and otherwise improving the social, economic and environmental quality of life of Bay Area communities.

Public transportation is the system that provides mobility to travellers for whom distance proves a hardship and who have no other transportation options. Public transportation is not an isolated system; in fact, its primary function depends on people, on riders. The public transportation "system" begins with people and affects local community and regional economic opportunities, affordable housing, land-use development patterns, and environmental quality. The importance of the public transportation system requires that a broad-based coalition be involved in the design of a "public transportation vision."

Transit workers are the frontline of the public transportation system and work within it on a daily basis. They must be principal partners in creating a regional transportation vision and in implementing steps to improve or otherwise change the public transportation system. This preliminary "vision" of a public transportation system reflects a significant step towards realizing a San Francisco Bay Area region that is socially just and ecologically sustainable. We believe all regional or local public transportation "visions" should include and address the following elements and considerations:

* The Coordinating Council represents San Francisco Municipal Railway (Muni, TWU-250A), Santa Clara Transit (ATU-265), Greyhound (ATU-1225), AC Transit-Alameda County (ATU-192), Golden Gate Transit-Marín County (ATU-1575) Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART, ATU-1555), San Mateo Transit (Samtrans, ATU-1574), UPE-790, UTU-23, UTU-1741, SEIU-707 (Scope), and ATU-1605. Besides the Urban Habitat Program (with whom I work), other participants in these meetings have included Greenpeace, Sierra Club, Greenbelt Alliance, and Urban Ecology.

Labor

The transit operators are the frontline of the public transportation system. The operation and maintenance of a public mass transportation system requires the involvement of skilled labor; public transportation should be operated and maintained by union transit workers. More emphasis on mass transit and transportation alternatives can promote job creation, economic opportunity, and environmental protection. The public needs to understand the health, safety, and security issues of transit workers. Public and local government support is needed to operate and maintain the highest quality public mass transportation systems. Public transit workers must be participants in decisions that affect their work; and the public transit workers must have a central role in shaping decisions that affect the public transportation systems. Public transit workers must be informed about financial public transportation support mechanisms created by federal, state, regional, and local government. Public mass transit is an essential public service (like fire and police) and should not be “contracted out” or privatized.

Economic Opportunities

Public transportation invites economic activity to a community. Public transportation can improve the diversity of employment and economic opportunity by increasing accessibility and encouraging multipurpose land uses that meet larger community needs. Some of the mechanisms that achieve these elements are:

1. Commercial/residential/office/recreation/open space mixed-use and land-use development patterns.
2. Locating needed services and housing near work-sites.
3. Orienting neighborhoods around distances that one can walk or bike.
4. Coordinated broad-based community involvement in transportation, land-use, and economic development planning.

Access

Equitable access to efficient and affordable public mass transit systems that serve all regional communities is essential. Transportation access has a particular obligation to first serve those communities least likely to have access to motor vehicles, including the socially and economically disadvantaged, communities of color, low-income and working communities, youth and

seniors, and the physically disabled. Transportation systems need to be designed so that jobs, child care services, health services, shopping, and recreation, are easily accessible and in close proximity to one another. Public transportation systems must be “user-friendly” to non-English speaking people and serve the multicultural communities that make up the Bay Area.

Environmental Quality

Public transportation is related to environmental quality and as an alternative to motor vehicle use it does the following:

1. Reduces traffic congestion.
2. Improves air quality by reducing air toxins produced by auto exhaust and smog.
3. Improves water quality by reducing urban runoff (water from city streets and sewers carrying oil and soot from motor vehicle emissions, leaking fluids, battery acids, tires, and other motor vehicle parts containing poisonous substances).
4. Provides for variety in land-use decisions, including open space, urban core development, and reduction in suburban sprawl.
5. Reduces the area of land being designated for vehicle use, such as road expansions, additions, and parking lots.
6. Utilizes energy resources more efficiently and cost-effectively.

Within new and existing communities we need to affirm pedestrian access and mobility and reduce reliance on personal automobile use by promoting and creating safe, fun, and ecologically sustainable pedestrian walkways and bikeways. Transportation and land-use planning must be integrated.

Safety

The public transportation system has an obligation to be safe, secure, and healthy for all—transit workers and the public alike. Additional security needs to be implemented where necessary in order to prevent crimes directed toward transit workers and riders. This security needs to be accountable to transit workers and the public. Environmental health risks associated with transit operation (e.g. exposure to airborne lead, carbon monoxide, etc.) must be reduced. Ways must be found to reduce hypertension and stress among transit operators. ■

In 1995, Luz DeVerano Cervantes was a transportation project associate with the Urban Habitat Program.

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Economic Justice

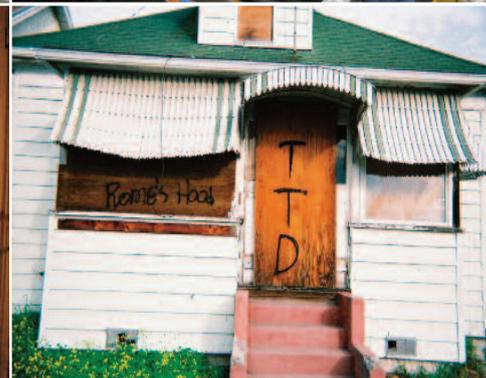


Environmental Justice



Racial Justice

Transportation Justice



Spaces, Places, and Regionalism

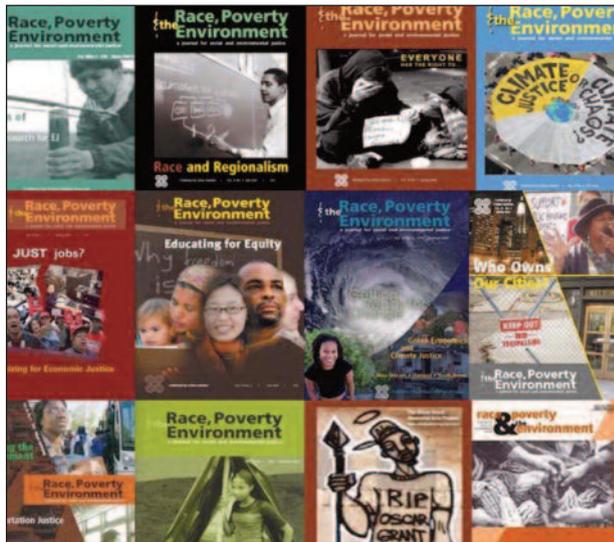
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