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Transformative Community Planning Can Advance Mobility Justice

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Issue

Top-down transportation planning practices have historically ignored the needs and concerns of low-income communities of color. Federal funding guidelines, agency objectives, regional and local planning processes, and community priorities often conflict with each other at the expense of the health, safety, and livelihood of vulnerable populations. Decades of discriminatory government policies and disinvestment have enabled gentrification, particularly in underserved neighborhoods where new transportation investments make these areas more accessible and attractive to wealthier, often white, residents, which can lead to residential and commercial displacement as public investments increase land values and rents. Mobility justice, which treats mobility as a fundamental human right and promotes a version of transportation planning that incorporates distributive, procedural, and recognition justice, offers an alternative framework.

In this work, we incorporated the aims of transformative community planning: to build the capacity of the community to lead future planning and development projects by actively listening to, acknowledging, and respecting the expertise of community stakeholders; to show respect for stakeholders by challenging them to transform relations between groups, rather than glossing over conflict; and to acknowledge openly the biases brought to the table by planners and the planning profession's history of bias. Working closely with

two community advisory councils—one in East Oakland, CA and one in Richmond, CA—composed of local leaders, small business owners, environmental justice advocates, and transit-dependent residents, we utilized transformative community planning practices such as power-sharing and co-learning to collaboratively examine two transportation planning case studies.

The first case study was an analysis of the East Bay Bus Rapid Transit project in East Oakland that employed top-down planning that critics contend disregarded community concerns about gentrification, displacement, public safety, and business closures. We partnered with our project advisory council to examine what went wrong with this project from the community's point of view.¹ The second case study involved Richmond's Transformative Climate Communities (TCC) infrastructure projects, known as Richmond Rising, proposed through an extensive public engagement process and currently being implemented together with a collaborative of community-based organizations.² Again, we worked with a city-funded body of residents and city staff engaged in updating the city's Housing Element to evaluate three mobility infrastructure projects and the transformational planning process.³

Our findings and recommendations highlight how transformative community planning models can ensure planners address the needs of low-income communities of color and advance mobility justice.

Key Research Findings

Research Findings	Policy Recommendations
East Oakland BRT Case Study	
After BRT opened, reported traffic casualties on/near the corridor rose by over 30% in an already dangerous, high-injury network.	The City of Oakland, AC Transit, and Alameda County can implement context-sensitive design changes to BRT infrastructure to reduce traffic violence.
BRT may have helped fuel speculation in the real estate market that contributed to pre-existing patterns of residential displacement and gentrification.	City and county governments can require commercial and residential anti-displacement measures in approving transit-oriented development.
By 2019, 502 businesses (37%) had closed; in a 52-case subsample, 52% were legacy; business owners faced barriers to accessing City mitigation funds.	Local governments and transportation agencies should standardize, simplify, and expand access to business impact mitigation funds to prevent business closures. Business impact mitigation funds to small businesses should take the form of grants in anticipation of lost revenues.
Community knowledge about the broader social impacts of the project, such as sex trafficking, did not receive adequate attention in the planning and implementation stages.	Local agencies should work with community leaders to address unintended consequences of transit infrastructure.
Richmond Rising Case Study	
The three Richmond Rising mobility infrastructure projects may contribute to gentrification of low-income Black and Latino/x communities.	Richmond should consider adding to its Displacement Avoidance Plan strategies such as affordability calculated based on neighborhood, rather than regional, incomes and a business impact mitigation fund.
Richmond's transformative planning process is directly addressing potential gentrification and displacement impacts through a Displacement Avoidance Plan, overseen by a Collaborative Stakeholder Committee.	Richmond should continue using transformative community planning processes and remain responsive to stakeholder concerns.

More Information

This policy brief is based on the report “Transformative Community Planning as a Tool for Advancing Mobility Justice” which can be found at: <https://www.ucits.org/research-project/2024-01-3t/>. For more information about the findings presented in this brief, please contact Charisma Acey at charisma.acey@berkeley.edu or Margaretta Lin at margarettalin@berkeley.edu.

¹The East Oakland Community Advisory Council consisted of representatives from the Oakland Department of Transportation; Communities for a Better Environment; East Bay Asian Youth Center; EastSide Arts Alliance and the Black Cultural Zone Collaborative; East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy; Lao Family Community Development; Hood Planning Group; and the Native American Health Center.

²The Richmond Rising Collaborative Stakeholder Committee consists of GRID Alternatives, Groundwork Richmond, Rich City Rides, Trust for Public Land, Urban Tilth, and the Center for Global Healthy Cities, two youth members nominated from among the Richmond Rising Youth Fellows Cohort, and up to six community members.

³The Richmond Resident Advisory Council consisted of multiple local residents and City of Richmond staff from the Transformative Climate Communities Project, the Housing Department, and the Community Development Department.

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