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Centering Unhoused Communities in Transit-Oriented Development



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Introduction

Like all public agencies across Los Angeles, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (“Metro”) is increasingly grappling with the effects of mass housing precarity and homelessness.¹ The agency reports an average of 800 unhoused people sheltering on its system on a given night,² most often at stops, stations, platforms and transit vehicles, but also on Metro-owned property such as rights-of-way easements, parking lots, and facilities.³

Metro has declared its commitment to addressing housing unaffordability and homelessness — yet it policing and harassing unhoused people on its system.

Transportation planners across the country agree that “homelessness is everyone’s problem.”⁴ Since 2017, Metro has tapped transportation dollars to pay for homeless services on its trains, investing millions to fund multi-disciplinary outreach teams that follow a “Housing First” approach to place unhoused individuals in temporary and permanent housing.⁵ Metro has also publicly committed to pursuing joint-development agreement projects that build shelters and affordable housing on Metro-owned land.⁶ Its 2021 Joint Development Policy included its “Affordable First” policy of building 100% income-restricted housing on unused parcels owned by the agency — in order to “build as much affordable housing near transit for those who need it most, as soon as possible.”⁷

Despite these investments, Metro has admitted to achieving “no meaningful reduction” in the number of unhoused riders.⁸ The agency counted 4,100 unhoused riders in August 2021,⁹ and 5,700 in August 2022.¹⁰ The increasing prevalence of homelessness on public transit reflects the nationwide phenomenon housing precarity and homelessness, exacerbated by the spikes in evictions with the lifting of COVID-19 eviction moratoria.¹¹

Metro’s treatment of unhoused people on its trains and properties suggests that its strategy for unhoused riders seeking refuge on public transit is to make them disappear. Instead of focusing on creating permanent housing to address the root cause of homelessness, the agency deploys law enforcement alongside homeless services, and its end-of-line policy forces approximately 600 unhoused riders to disembark from its vehicles nightly, moving them to nearby sidewalks, parks, and building alcoves.¹² Union Station, which once operated 24/7, closed its doors to the waves of people that would head there to sleep.¹³

Unhoused individuals seeking refuge on Metro-owned land are harassed by L.A.M.C. 41.18 enforcement.

Transportation agencies encounter homelessness even beyond stations and transit vehicles. PATH, the County’s transitional housing service provider, counts “hundreds” of encampments on Metro-owned property, facilities, and rights-of-way. As of 2022, Metro was formally tracking 12 encampment locations county-wide.¹⁴

Encampments near or on Metro-owned property often fall within L.A. Municipal Code (“LAMC”) 41.18 anti-camping zones. Under LAMC 41.18(d)(2),¹⁵ the City Council can and have banned people from sitting, laying, sleeping, or keeping personal property within 500 feet from subways, railways, and bike path. The enforcement of this ordinance imposes police accompanied “sweeps” upon the unhoused in the name of public health and sanitation, often with no prior notice. Metro’s internal “Homeless Encampment Clean-Up Procedure” collaborates with police to sweep encampments on its lands, based on “visibility to public and *Metro patrons*” (italicization added to emphasize that unhoused riders are *not* considered Metro patrons), while prioritizing complaints made by the Metro Board, City Council, and other agencies.¹⁶ Taxpayers have paid over \$150M for these sweeps since 2019, yet less than 1% of individuals swept by the program have been moved into permanent housing.¹⁷ According to data from the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, 41.18 sweeps do next to nothing to move people into permanent housing, instead forcibly shuffling the unhoused from one block to the next. Sweeps sever existing support networks, depriving unhoused people of essential property and increasing death rates.¹⁸

Though the proven failure of sweeps in reducing homelessness,¹⁹ City Council has continued to expand 41.18 zones. The ordinance has failed to resolve homelessness, rather legitimizing violent evictions that displace the unhoused again and again from their sites of refuge.

Metro’s Joint Development Policy fails to serve the unhoused people seeking refuge on its vehicles and land.

Metro’s Joint Development Policy contradicts its own stated objective of holding transit-oriented development affordable for those most in need of transit. The policy requires only a minimum of 25% of units per new development to be set aside for “low-income” households, where “low income” permits households up to 80% AMI, or \$70,650 for an individual.²⁰ The policy claims that it prioritizes projects that are 100% “income-restricted,” but “income-restricted” units permit households up to 120% of Area Median Income (AMI) — which, in Los Angeles as of 2023, is nearly \$118,000 for an individual.

Given that these income limits are well above the income of the average unhoused person, the new housing built on Metro land will likely be occupied by above-average income and even white-collar professionals, rather than those in the greatest need. Moreover, Metro’s harassment of unhoused people raises questions as to how people with histories of homelessness will be treated once within Metro-owned housing.

Metro and other transit agencies, facing low ridership and an impending fiscal cliff, scapegoat unhoused and low-income riders who rely the most on public transit.

Transit agencies face an impending fiscal cliff.²¹ Metro’s fiscal projections are particularly dire; according to a February 2023 board report, it projects an estimated \$400 million budget deficit in 2025, ballooning to a staggering \$1 billion shortage by 2026 when one-time federal funding runs out.²² Ridership on transit systems across the country has been declining for over a decade, but the COVID-19 pandemic caused a particularly steep drop. As of March 2023, the American Public Transportation Agency estimated that ridership remained at 70% of pre-pandemic levels, with even lower recovery in bigger cities.²³

With these low ridership levels and insufficient federal and state funding, many transit advocates warn of a “death spiral” for agencies.²⁴

In response to low ridership, many agencies are taking the opportunity to increase policing. New York City’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority is increasing policing around fare evasion, in the name of “curbing disorder” and enticing riders back.²⁵ Metro riders are citing lack of safety for their avoidance of transit,²⁶ and in response, the agency is taking steps to create its own police force.²⁷ With increased emphasis on “law and order,” unhoused individuals at transit stations and on vehicles face new forms of harassment and violence; for example, the agency has begun blasting classical music at stations to drive away those seeking shelter.²⁸

Metro’s carceral strategies to hide the homelessness on its system only exacerbate the problem; alternative solutions are imperative.

Metro insists that “first and foremost, we’re a transit agency.”²⁹ Indeed, the planners working in transit agencies are tasked with the important mission of moving people through the city sustainably and efficiently. But transportation planners must recognize unhoused riders as Metro patrons too, with access and mobility needs even more acute than the average housed rider. Unhoused individuals will continue to seek shelter where they can find it, including on transit agency-owned vehicles and property. As such, Metro and other transit agencies must accept their responsibility to address homelessness. Rather than continuing to criminalize, discriminate, and banish unhoused people from public transit systems, Metro homelessness policy must recognize that the unhoused are often those who need public transit the most. Transportation planners must connect with unhoused communities on Metro-owned land to address their immediate needs, building trust and a path to permanent housing.

This report shares the work of the 2023 UCLA Community Collaborative on Spatial Justice for transportation planners seeking an alternative to transit agencies’ current carceral approach to managing homelessness.

The critiques and alternative visions generated by this group can serve as a model to all planners who are willing to center poor people’s movements that demand for the state to cease criminalizing and wreaking violence on the people it claims to serve.

Alternative Solutions

In 2023, Professor Ananya Roy led the UCLA Urban Planning Community Collaborative: Spatial Justice in the Age of Mass Homelessness: A Lab for Liberatory Projects. The Community Collaborative is an annual six-month project that brings together community organizers and master’s students to partner on research and praxis. The 2023 Community Collaborative comprised Master of Urban and Regional Planning students, community organizers fighting for self-determination of unhoused communities across Los Angeles, and unhoused residents of the Aetna Street community.³⁰

Site Description

The Aetna Street community formed on and near Metro-owned land adjacent to the Metro G (Orange) Line Van Nuys Station and the Orange Line Bikeway. City Council has designated the area as an L.A.M.C. 41.18 anti-camping enforcement zone.³¹ The legal parcels are zoned MTA Right-of-Way Project Area (ZI-1117) and Railroad Leased Property (ZI-352), within a Transit Priority Area.³² Many Aetna community members previously entered the adjacent Salvation Army’s A Bridge Home shelter, but exited after experiencing harsh, “prison-like” conditions.³³

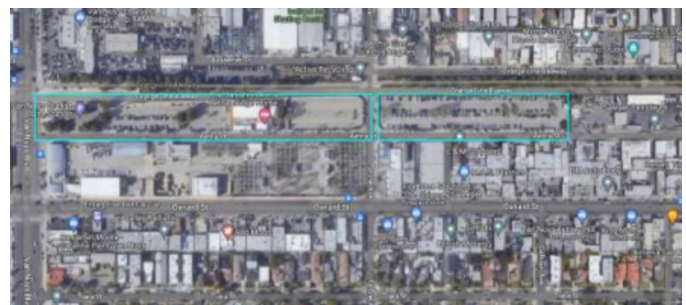


Figure 1: Metro-owned parcels on Aetna St. Righthand parcel was the parcel of interest for the Community Collaborative

Project Descriptions

The Community Collaborative consisted of five groups of students and community partners, each working on a unique challenge facing the Aetna Street community. The authors of this report participated in the DIY Urbanism Collective and the People’s Plan groups, which addressed immediate mobility needs of our community partners and laid the groundwork for developing a shared community vision and demands for the vacant Metro-owned land on Aetna Street.

The final deliverables of these projects were intentionally flexible, in order to be responsive to shifting Aetna Street community needs and varying levels of capacity among our partners. Brief summaries of each project are below. Full descriptions of the projects will be available on the UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy [website](#).

DIY Urbanism Collective

The DIY Urbanism Collective produced the DIY Platform-on-Wheels project, responding to Aetna Street residents’ desire for a way to move their tents during a 41.18 sweep.

The Collective used donated wooden shipping pallets to construct platforms, attaching two pallets and adding wheels. The four platforms-on-wheels that the Collective built were immediately claimed by unhoused Aetna residents, who can now quickly and easily move their home and belongings during a sweep. In addition to this enhanced mobility during times of state inflicted duress, pitching tents on top of these platforms-on-wheels helps the user keep their home cleaner, drier, and more insulated.

The Collective also created a how-to [video](#) and [zine](#) to share their process and encourage other mutual aid groups to host DIY build events to build community solidarity and address immediate needs of their unhoused neighbors.

The People’s Plan

The People’s Plan group focused on the community planning process of visioning a people’s plan for two Metro parcels on Aetna Street. The group organized in-person events including an interactive activity at Aetnapalooza, a Community Healing Night, and a town-hall style Community Visioning Circle to build relationships and understand the Aetna Street community’s needs and dreams around the Metro lots.

Based on learnings from these events, the group wrote a public letter to the institutional actors shaping Aetna Street, including the City of LA, Metro, and the Salvation Army. The group also created a map reflecting community visions for the Metro lots to be publicly displayed on Aetna Street in order to continue building momentum for collective organizing in the community.

For transportation planners, the key learning from this effort is that public agencies must be willing to be patient, flexible, and responsive to unhoused communities and other vulnerable groups. Many individuals in these groups have experienced direct and indirect harm from public agencies, and planners must take long-term approaches to rebuild trust with these communities. A key component of building trust is responding to communities’ needs and demands, even when they diverge from what the agency may have initially planned. True community participation requires agencies to integrate community feedback, rather than pursuing their original goals in the face of community pushback.

Public Affairs

The Public Affairs group published the *Street Views* Community Newspaper, a mutual aid news publication made by and for people who are unhoused. Following in the tradition of self published newspapers by poor peoples’ movements, *Street Views* facilitates the sharing of information among unhoused individuals across LA, and provides alternative coverage of issues around housing and homelessness from the perspective of unhoused communities. The [inaugural edition](#) of *Street Views* included coverage of Aetnapalooza; first-person narratives and exposés of the County tiny homes and Mayor’s Inside Safe programs; resources, poetry, art, and more. Submissions were collected from unhoused residents and advocates, and copies were distributed to mutual aid groups and elected representatives.

Beyond 41.18: Subversive Ethnographies

The Subversive Ethnographies group created the [beyond4118.com](#) website, a counter-mapping platform where users can submit their personal experiences living and organizing in L.A.M.C. 41.18 zones. This group was interested in using counter-mapping as a tactic to oppose state narratives about 41.18 and share stories about how 41.18 actually impacts unhoused individuals on the ground.

They began gathering narratives during a weekly Aetna Street Community Night, and will continue to solicit and post narratives through the website. The website also includes links to resources from the other Community Collaborative groups and recommendations for further reading.

41.18 Escuelita with LATU

This group hosted a teach-in through the Los Angeles Tenants Union’s (LATU) monthly popular education sessions — called Sunday School or Escuelita — to educate LATU members on the parallels between their struggle and demands and that of their unhoused neighbors. The discussion raised important parallels between evictions and L.A.M.C. 41.18 sweeps as state sanctioned displacement, as well as unpacking prejudices many housed tenants hold about unhoused tenants in order to build solidarity.

Recommendations for Metro

Drawing on collective learnings from Community Collaborative, we propose several policy recommendations to guide Metro’s response to homelessness. We urge transportation planners in key transit agencies to consider these alternative, more effective approaches to addressing homelessness on agency-owned properties. These recommendations center the demands of Aetna Street community members on Metro land surrounding the Van Nuys Orange Line Station, but can act as a blueprint for other Metro parcels located near encampments — if and only if the residents of those encampments participate meaningfully in planning the future of those parcels.

- **Update Metro’s Joint Development Policy to prioritize Permanent Supportive Housing for unhoused riders.** If Metro wishes to provide housing for unhoused riders, it must create the housing that those riders need: permanent supportive housing with wraparound services. Aetna Street residents have consistently demanded Permanent Supportive Housing for all community members who desire housing. This form of housing meets the complex needs of unhoused individuals by providing long-term rental subsidies that are actually affordable for individuals, paired with wraparound services.
- **Preserve unhoused communities, rather than destroying them.** Aetna Street residents frequently highlight the fact that they wish to remain on Aetna Street because they have built a strong community that has ensured their survival while living outside. In a public letter to Mayor Karen Bass responding to Inside Safe, Aetna Street residents demanded an end to 41.18 sweeps and provision of shelter within 3 miles of the shelter, to ensure that community members could stay close to existing jobs, appointments, services, and social and familial ties.³⁴ This demand has two main implications for Metro.
 - *First*, Metro must not encourage or allow sweeping encampments on their property, which only serves to displace residents and sever communities.
 - *Second*, Metro should foster and strengthen community ties through building community infrastructure. In a town hall-style community event led by the People’s Plan team of the Community Collaborative, Aetna community members listed housing as their number one priority, followed by shared resources including a community center and a community kitchen and garden. Metro can use its land to build these facilities in tandem with affordable housing.
- **Instate a Tenant Advisory Council.** Metro must answer to a body of advisors comprising individuals with lived experience of homelessness, current tenants of housing built on Metro land, and designated representatives of those currently unhoused. The Aetna Street community has time and again demanded, “No decisions about us, without us!” Metro must be answerable to people with lived experiences of the issues that it seeks to address. The agency can look to the Tenant Advisory Council established by A Community of Friends,³⁵ a nonprofit developer that provides permanent supportive housing, as a model for how to structure such a body.
- **Exercise patience and compassion rather than imposing planning timelines onto people who are fighting for survival.** Planners must understand that life outside is a constant battle for survival. Planning at the speed of trust requires flexibility and responsiveness to the changing conditions facing the people on the ground. housing, as a model for how to structure such a body.

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