

# Why Attention to Complete Streets Implementation is So Important in Serving Historically Disadvantaged Communities

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**T**he decisions we make every day as transportation professionals can impact quality of life, access to opportunities, and can result in systemic inequities in our communities. This became very clear as we adapted to new norms throughout the pandemic. The undeniable evidence of disproportionate impacts has been eye-opening. We need to act now and revisit our practices and perspective of success in our profession. We stand at a new crossroads—recognizing the consequences of the past—and must take a new path that radically innovates the way we think, assess, and implement.



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***Acknowledging the consequences of prior actions is the first step on the path towards building a transportation system for all users of all abilities, and prioritizing the needs of historically disadvantaged communities.*** As transportation planners and engineers, we must acknowledge our part in the mistakes of the past and strive to self-correct those policies, programs, and practices that can greatly address and prevent further inequities in the built environment.

It is important to remind ourselves that transportation is not important for what it **is** (roads, bridges, trains, and planes). Transportation is important for what it **does**—it gets people to where they need to go and connects people to community and opportunity. More than ever, how we define transportation, how we plan, design, operate, and measure its effectiveness in today’s society needs to be revisited by our industry. Thinking about the purpose of transportation and properly incorporating an equity lens on its outcomes to the communities it serves will allow for an intentional refocus on effective strategies moving forward.

So what needs to change? Many of our standard practices need to be reexamined, starting with a transportation department’s organizational structure, as well as reassessing our long-standing processes in transportation from planning through construction management. We need to realign transportation goals with community visions and other jurisdiction-wide goals, such as sustainability, to leverage transportation resources as a tool to help underprivileged communities.

Our comprehensive plans normally align transportation goals with other jurisdictional goals, but the performance measures and strategies often emphasize mobility improvements based on system performance only, without considering safe and reliable community connections to essential services. Safe access to reliable transportation service for residents who cannot afford a private automobile needs to be a higher priority in our industry, and specifically evaluated in our transportation studies and transit operations assessments.

As our industry moves to a more data-driven decision-making process thanks to advances in information technology, we still must apply an “equity lens” throughout our process. Opportunities for such applications include:

- Defining the type of projects that qualify for specific funding sources,
- Developing a region/jurisdiction level transportation network,
- Prioritizing projects for inclusion in the CIP/budget,
- Ensuring transit service operations performance measures include serving communities that access to jobs during off-peak hours,
- Identifying stakeholder outreach milestones in a project as well as outreach methods, and
- Defining a successful transportation project, with measurable performance indicators.

Recent progressive initiatives in our industry such as Vision Zero include equity elements. ITE’s Vision Zero Core Elements include “Equity-Focused Analysis and Programs. Commitment is made to an equitable approach and outcomes, including prioritizing engagement and investments in traditionally under-served communities and adopting equitable traffic enforcement practices.”<sup>1</sup> Cities embracing Vision Zero have generally been advocates for promoting this element of the program, and include our industry “E’s” to encourage collaboration: evaluation, engineering, education, engagement, enforcement, and equity. When implementing Vision Zero Action Plans, many have experienced that police attempts to enforce pedestrian safety in communities are not welcome due to tension with law enforcement. This lesson-learned has emphasized the importance of stakeholder engagement early and often in our processes.

It became all too clear during the pandemic that traditional methods for community engagement needed to be adapted to conditions. There are various sources and documents identifying new methods for outreach and tools. The main thread through these sources was the need to ensure inclusive, equitable, and diverse public outreach and engagement as part of the important decision-making process. The theory isn’t new, but it certainly has been heightened this past year.

However, limited industry guidance exists for comprehensively evaluating transportation service to disadvantaged communities. These communities rely on low-cost, timely, and dependable transportation options to access jobs because of the high cost to own a private automobile.

### **How Communities Are Addressing Equity**

The Victoria Transport Policy Institute’s research summarizes the challenges and approach: “Many existing evaluation tools focus on a narrow set of impacts on a particular group of people. Transport equity analysis is often ad hoc, based on the concerns and values of the stakeholders involved in a planning process; other, significant impacts may be overlooked or undervalued.”<sup>2</sup> The research continues to summarize the challenge, stating that “Conventional planning tends to evaluate transport based on mobility (physical travel), using indicators such as traffic speed and roadway level-of-service. However, mobility is seldom an end in itself, the ultimate goal of most transport activities is accessibility, which refers to people’s ability to reach desired services and activities.”

The good news is that cities are taking progressive steps to add an “equity lens” to transportation-related efforts. As Oakland Department of Transportation Director (OakDOT) Ryan Russo discussed in the March 2021 ITE Virtual Technical Conference, the City of Oakland, CA, USA has closed more than 20 miles (32.1 kilometers) of streets to regular traffic as part of its Slow Streets program during the pandemic. The program’s goal is to slow or

lessen street traffic on certain streets in order to make them safer for pedestrians to engage in physically distant walking, biking, or other physical activities.

However, the city recognized the need to evaluate which pedestrians Slow Streets was helping and whom the program might overlook. The program received feedback that many residents, especially essential workers, would benefit more from improved traffic safety at access points to essential services on busier arterial roads rather than physically distant walking corridors on roads that already had less traffic. In response, the city added an “Essential Places” aspect of the program to create temporary traffic infrastructure changes that allow safer access to services such as grocery stores, food distribution sites, and COVID-19 testing sites.

Next, the city paused the addition of new Slow Streets corridors in order to evaluate the impact of the existing sites through an equity lens. The program is using data from OakDOT’s Geographic Equity Toolbox to prioritize reaching out to the most historically and currently overlooked neighborhoods first and to assess the impacts of Slow Streets so that they can adapt the program to better serve the community. Oakland’s Slow Streets program rollout is an important demonstration of how equity work must go hand in hand with the move toward more complete streets.

The City of Baltimore, MD, USA has several transportation initiatives underway to improve service to historically underprivileged communities. Baltimore has addressed project development and delivery through its City Council’s Complete Streets Ordinance, which identifies specific elements of the transportation process requiring the application of an equity lens. Key requirements include the inclusion of an equity assessment as part of the project selection/prioritization process, equity policies in stakeholder outreach, and the application of an “equity lens” to the data-driven *Complete Streets Annual Report*.

Baltimore’s community engagement policies address equity from a number of valuable perspectives: race, gender, culture, income, age, and accessibility. Each of these engagement policies defines the importance of customizing outreach for the sector of the community and recommended outreach strategies to encourage participation.

The city leveraged a Transportation Equity Gap Analysis, funded by the Baltimore Metropolitan Council, to develop a methodology for technically assessing equity in the City using available data and technical tools. This methodology will be applied to the city transportation department’s project prioritization process, and adds an important technical process for connecting equity policy to identifying and improving transportation service to historically disadvantaged communities. The city established a framework/method to measure transportation equity in Baltimore community populations by researching best practices (such as the Victoria Transport Policy Institute’s work) and developing the following products:

1. Identify underprivileged communities based on quantifiable equity indicators
2. Pinpoint employment centers, in proximity to the target historically disadvantaged communities, that possess relevant job opportunities
3. Evaluate the quality of the non-automobile transportation service to the target historically disadvantaged communities, understanding the work shift timeframes
4. Identify deficiencies / gaps in transportation service between the communities and employment centers
5. Engage the identified communities for input and understanding of their transportation service needs
6. Recommend strategies for service improvements collaboration with the communities

The city’s recently released *Complete Streets Design Manual* details the policies specified by the city’s ordinance, including the section “Addressing Equity in Baltimore.”

Another example of how to incorporate the equity lens in safety projects includes the Hillsborough Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) in Tampa, FL, USA, which recently completed a speed management action plan. With communities across

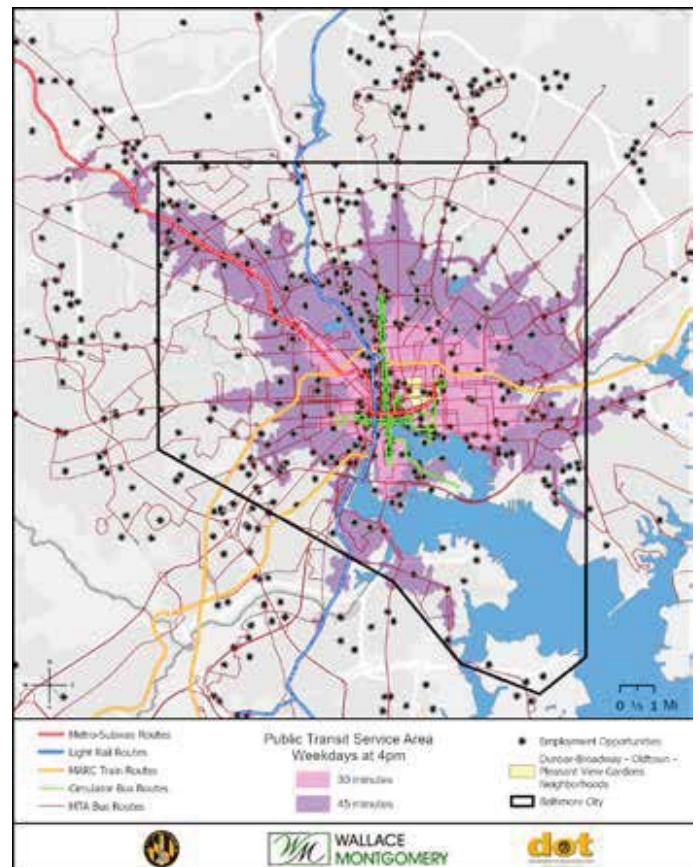


Figure 1. [caption t/k]

the country challenged with a safety crisis on their streets, the Hillsborough MPO’s plan considered equity indicators for prioritizing investment on their High Injury Network corridors. These indicators include consideration of the linear frontage of corridors that cut through communities of concern; which corridors cut through a schools two-mile walk shed; which corridors had transit services that create higher pedestrian exposure rates; which corridors had excessive posted/design speeds above national standards for the context; and which corridors had excessive volumes for the context. These indicators were in addition to the standard crash severity rates that are often the only indicator. The simple inclusion of these additional factors completely changed the priority of investment in the corridors that had the highest exposure for non-motorized users that could lead to continued serious and deadly crashes.

### Transformative Vernacular

The call to evolve how we plan and design for equity in transportation goes hand in hand with the need to evolve the words and language we use in the transportation industry. When we develop practices



Figure 2. Word cloud with terminology and ideas to move towards in transportation.

that prize efficiency or economic rationality more than effectiveness for human needs, the vocabulary we use to describe those practices perpetuates those ideas. **If we do not update our vocabulary, we will not be able to break from previous ways of thinking on how to measure success in transportation planning and engineering.** The word cloud in Figure 2 provides examples of terminology and ideas to move towards, while Figure 3 illustrates how we can move from some current terms to a more equitable vernacular.

For example, as transportation professionals working on corridor projects, we often follow design standards based on the street’s functional classification. These functional classifications exist independent of the land-use/community context, and seldom correspond to the modal priority of the street. Fortunately, many cities are embracing a “Street Typology,” which brings together the purpose of the street and the land use context for each street type. Complete Streets manuals, such as Baltimore’s new publication, identifies street types reflecting the purpose of the street and land use context. The design standards also take into account the street’s modal priority and curbside needs.

Another critical change in practice involves community engagement. The City of Baltimore’s Equity in Planning Committee states on its website that an equitable Baltimore “meaningfully engages residents through inclusive and collaborative processes to expand access to power and resources.”<sup>23</sup> As the committee suggests, community engagement is not only about information sharing, but about empowering communities and recognizing their input as invaluable to the implementation of an effective and equitable project.

As we develop our new best practices in addressing equity at all points within our transportation industry, it is important for us to identify potentially offensive or exclusive language. This terminology is likely not globally applicable, but tailored to the communities in our regions. Ask the community outreach and

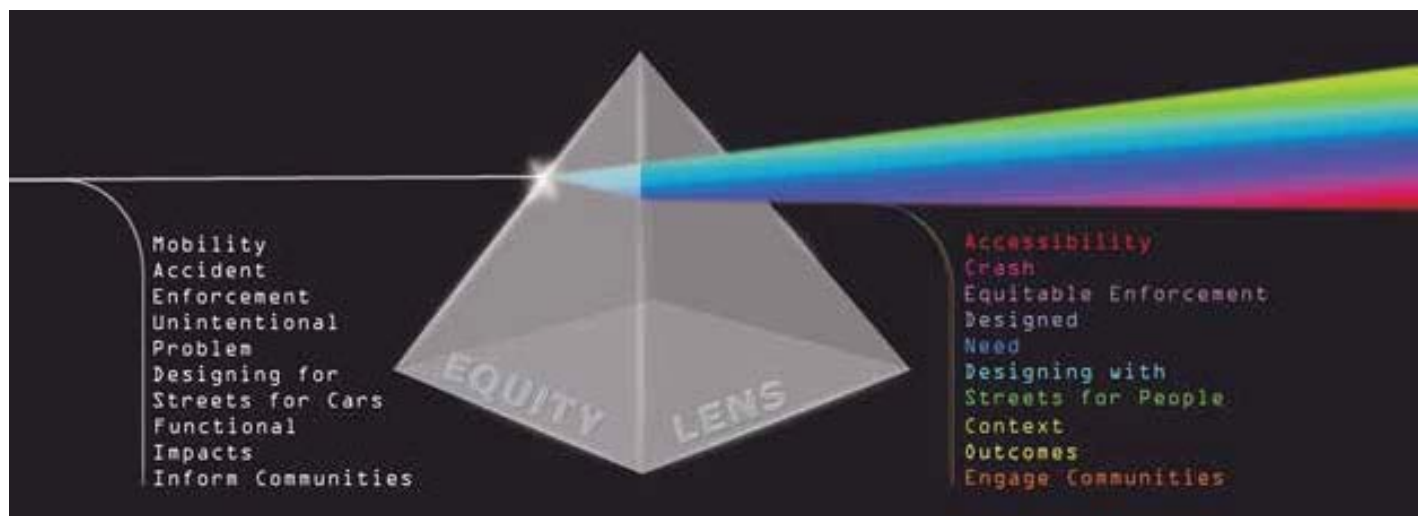


Figure 3. The equity lens and moving from current terms (left) toward a more equitable vernacular (right).



equity specialists in your city for advice, as they will know which terms center their needs the best. As we evolve our practices, we must also evolve our words.

### What is ITE Complete Streets Council's Role?

The ITE Complete Streets Council's (CSC) efforts to aggregate new guidance on incorporating equity into practice is a timely topic. The CSC's efforts are a subset of ITE's larger initiative to improve our industry's ability to apply an "equity lens" to transportation policies, programs, practices, standards and projects.

This effort will start by collecting examples from communities with existing practices in applying an equity lens. Our goal is to map a path forward, bridging the gap between progressive equity policies to identifying technical analysis tools in addressing inequities in the built environment. The effort will also include guidance on equitable and inclusive community engagement. How to address transportation accessibility needs for all users, especially in marginalized communities, to jobs, services, schools, parks and other economic opportunities. Focus on measuring accessibility as the central performance measure for building this equity assessment methodology. Accessibility and equity indicators will be identified from available demographic and possible new datasets.

The collections of various resources should provide a better framework for future equity assessments as well as leveraged to help communities with other opportunities such as economic development and sustainability initiatives.

The mission of this effort is to develop new best practices on the following topics:

- Identify inclusive community engagement practices and tools
- Identify language and terminology evolution needs
- Identify new quantitative and qualitative data needs
- Identify transportation equity indicators and methodology

- Identify how to measure success
- Identify complete street publication updates to reflect the outcome of this initiative

### Parting Thought

It's time to redefine how our industry measures success. This is incredibly important as how we measure success in transportation also shapes how we distribute resources and fiscal investment.

Imagine our transportation network as a spectrum of light. Currently, we have a sector that is visible and devoted to the efficient movement of people in automobiles. As the rest of the network struggles for resources, struggling to be prioritized, and sacrificed for the success of an already thriving auto centric sector. We can continue to look at this system, see the bright light and say, "what a success," or we can broaden our perspective and see that the network as a whole is burning out. We must embrace the purpose of transportation to create the full, bright spectrum of transportation choices our communities expect and deserve.

Developing an equity lens for success requires new voices, perspectives, and bold ideas. If you have community transportation equity examples, technical expertise, or interest in this effort, the CSC is looking for you. Simply contact Larry Marcus at [lmarcus.forward.progress@gmail.com](mailto:lmarcus.forward.progress@gmail.com) to express your interest or share any resource links. [itej](#)

### Acknowledgements

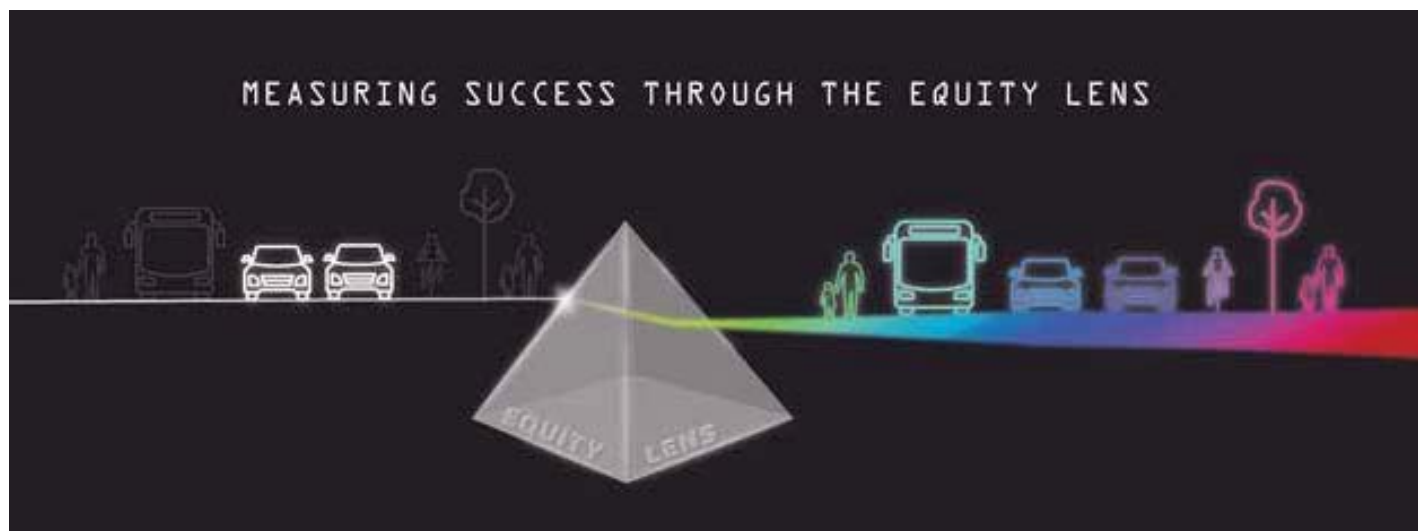


Figure 4. Equity Lens Example: Measuring Success.

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**Lawrence Marcus (M)**, former chair of the ITE Complete Streets Council, is a consultant with Wallace Montgomery and recently founded Forward Progress, LLC. Wallace Montgomery has been supporting the City of Baltimore's Complete Streets and equity specialists to develop equity assessment tools and publish the city's first Complete Streets Manual. The manual delivers the innovative approaches outlined in the City Council's Complete Streets Ordinance: policies for

equity in public engagement, equity in project prioritization, and equity in measuring transportation network performance.



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