



Date: May 7, 2021
To: U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Transportation and Infrastructure
From: Veronica O. Davis, PE
Subject: Testimony of Veronica O. Davis, PE of Transportation & Drainage Operations for the City of Houston, Texas

Before the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, Subcommittee on Transportation and Infrastructure
“Equity in Transportation Infrastructure: Connecting Communities, Removing Barriers, and Repairing Networks across America”
May 11, 2021

Good morning, Chair Cardin, Ranking Member Cramer, and Members of the Subcommittee on Transportation and Infrastructure. On behalf of Mayor Sylvester Turner and the 2.3 million residents of the City of Houston, I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Veronica O. Davis and I am the Director of Transportation & Drainage Operations within the City of Houston’s Public Works Department. In this role, I have oversight of almost 16,000 lane-miles, which is more than the distance from Houston to Tokyo and back, 3,500 miles of storm sewer, and 3,600 miles of ditches including 33 stormwater detention basins. For a sense of scale, Houston has over double the lane-miles of Montgomery County, Maryland and we are approximately the same size of Frederick County, Maryland.¹ Transportation and drainage are linked in Houston, because our streets are a critical component of the stormwater conveyance system. Basically, our streets are intentionally designed to hold and move water to mitigate impacts of flooding to homes and businesses.

I am here in my official capacity for the City of Houston, however, I bring life experience and over 20 years of professional experience to the conversation today, including national and international recognition as an engineer who balances technical analysis with the human elements of transportation planning, design and operation. In 2012, I was recognized by President Obama and Secretary LaHood as a White House Champion of Change in Transportation Innovation. Currently, I serve on the board of America Walks and I am Houston’s representative for the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO). I will cite both organizations in my testimony today.

¹ According to the 2019 Mileage Report by the Maryland Department of Transportation, Montgomery County has 7,198 lane miles. The City of Houston is 671 square miles compared to Frederick County, Maryland has about 667 square miles.

memo.

Why are we Talking about Equity Today?

If inequity in transportation was solely about funding, we would probably not be having the discussion today. It is one thing to have lack of investment in a community, but it is another to have communities that are overburdened with unsafe roadways. We are having this conversation because the end results of decades of inequitable decision-making are negative public health impacts such as asthma², obesity, serious injuries, and fatalities³ that disproportionately affect low-income and communities with large Black, Hispanic, and/or Indigenous populations. For the purposes of this testimony, I will focus on serious injuries and fatalities.

Every other year, the National Complete Streets Coalition⁴ releases a report titled, *Dangerous by Design* which examines pedestrian fatalities across the nation. Some of the members on this subcommittee represent states that are in the top 20 most dangerous for pedestrians in the 2021 report: 2-Alabama, 4-Mississippi, 7-Arizona, 8-South Carolina, 14-Oklahoma, 15-Arkansas, 16-California, 18-Maryland, and 19-Michigan. Texas is number 10 and unfortunately, for the top 20 most dangerous metropolitan areas, the Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land region ranked the 18th most dangerous. What does this have to do with equity? Across the US, Black/African America and American Indian/Alaskan Native pedestrians die while walking at higher rates compared to other racial and ethnic groups. Although the income of the pedestrians who die is unknown, crashes that lead to deaths and serious injuries are most likely to occur in low-income communities. Additionally, when looking at urban versus rural areas across the country, people are struck at the same rate when controlling for population.⁵

Like many communities, the City of Houston has mapped a high injury network, which is an analysis of crashes that lead to death and serious injuries. We have found that 6% of our streets account for over 60% of the traffic deaths and serious injuries, and 52% of the high injury streets are in communities that are mostly low-income and minority populations with no vehicle households.

Defining Equity

In the transportation industry the discussion of equity is around distinguishing equality and equity, equality being everyone gets the same and equity is everyone gets what they need. Discussing these views in concept are generally challenging as they are built on the assumption that resources (people, time, money) are infinite. However, for my fellow transportation officials, we know all too well that the needs of our cities exceed the money, staff capacity, and time resources available to us.

Prior to joining the City of Houston, I co-owned a company which allowed me to work with communities, that were working to put more parameters around equity specific to transportation. One project I worked on was developing the Vision Zero equity framework for Montgomery County, Maryland. Based on the reality of limited resources, we

² Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America (2020). Asthma Disparities in America: A Roadmap to Reducing Burden on Racial and Ethnic Minorities <https://www.aafa.org/media/2743/asthma-disparities-in-america-burden-on-racial-ethnic-minorities.pdf>

³ National Complete Street Coalition (2021) Dangerous by Design <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/dangerous-by-design/>

⁴ America Walks is a partner organization to the National Complete Street Coalition.

⁵ National Complete Street Coalition (2021) Dangerous by Design. <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/dangerous-by-design/>

redefined equity as a prioritization criteria versus every community getting what they need. Few, if any cities, have the resources to provide every community what they need for mobility. However, as Montgomery County programs its actions related to Vision Zero, the resources will be prioritized in communities that have experienced historic under-investment as well as areas with high populations of Hispanic, Black, and/or low income neighborhoods because the data shows that is where most crash-related deaths and fatalities are occurring.⁶ In this case prioritizing equity is not only the right thing to do, it targets resources to the areas with the greatest need and greatest opportunity for life-saving improvement.

What is the Root Cause of Inequities?

As we examine the disproportionate impacts of our roadway system, the logical question is how did the US get to this point? If you examine any major city the findings will be almost identical. At root is race-based segregation compounded with decisions by planners, engineers, and elected officials to put highways and wide roads through minority⁷ and low-income communities. Richard Rothstein's book *The Color of Law* documents, across the country, the tactics to segregate communities.

The creation of our National Highway System resulted in the large-scale displacement of homes and businesses in minority and low-income neighborhoods. My personal story is that my grandparents and their community were displaced for the construction of I-10 through East Baton Rouge. My great grandmother's house was the only one left on the block. As a child I remember thinking it was odd that my great grandmother's house was under a highway. Beyond my personal anecdote, there is documentation through photos and historians, of the residual effects.

Complete Communities – How the City of Houston is Addressing Equity

Houston, like many other cities, has the same story. In 2017, Mayor Sylvester Turner created the Complete Communities Initiative, which seeks to redirect current city and federal resources to communities that are under-resourced. The Complete Communities initiative was established to be collaborative, impactful, and transformative. The ten communities represent what has been discussed throughout this testimony, Black, Hispanic, and/or low-income communities. Many of the communities overlap with Federally Designated Opportunity Zones.

As my team prioritizes the distribution of public works funding moving forward, we are prioritizing funding in Complete Communities to make it safer for people to walk, bike, use a wheelchair or cane, be pushed in a stroller, or drive. This includes projects to reduce the number of lanes for vehicles to reallocate space for wider sidewalks, high comfort bike lanes, drainage, and other streetscape improvements.

What about Rural Areas?

As mentioned earlier, the data from rural areas is comparable to the urban areas when controlling for the population distribution. The Houston-Galveston Area Council, which is our regional metropolitan planning organization, has a

⁶ Montgomery County Department of Transportation (2019) Vision Zero Equity Framework Final Report

<https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/visionzero/Resources/Files/Equity%20Task%20Force%20Framework%20FINAL.pdf>

Veronica O. Davis was a member of the consultant team.

⁷ Minority in this case includes people who are classified as White today, but there were specific restrictive covenants to keep them out of White communities as defined in the 1960s. Examples include people of Italian, Irish, and Jewish heritages.

Livable Communities program that works with local communities to reimagine auto-focused infrastructure, policies, and programs to be more multi-modal friendly⁸. Relatively rural communities in the Houston-Galveston region, including the cities of Waller (pop. 3,124) and Hempstead (pop. 5,885) have undertaken Livable Centers studies to enhance bike/ped accommodations and transit. Many rural communities have older populations that do not drive or are disabled. They too, need multimodal transportation investments. Transportation equity is not an issue solely for urban areas.

What can be done at the Federal Level?

The present-day federal surface transportation policy continues to incentivize the construction of high-speed, auto-centric roads at the expense of other modes of transportation, and these projects can move forward with little local input. The US is still spending \$50 billion per year building the same types of infrastructure that displaced and divided communities of color.

As a member of the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO)⁹, I have worked with my colleagues to develop a list of priorities for the upcoming transportation bill. Today, I will talk to four:

- Reconnect Communities Act: Like many cities, Houston has numerous infrastructural barriers. In addition to interstates built in the 1960s and 1970s, Houston has 13 freight rail lines that merge near downtown, 2 major freight rail yards on the north side of downtown and more than 700 at-grade crossings. All pose safety risks for people walking and biking and require retrofits. This legislation could be an important step to truly plan the projects within the context of the community's needs rather than solely traditional quantitative performance measures such as travel time.
- Empower Cities to Realize their Vision: NACTO has advocated for Congress to direct federal funding to cities and give them control over state-administered projects within their borders. This is to prevent the siphoning of federal funds away from city equity, resilience, or safety projects towards highway construction or expansion.¹⁰
- Create a Pedestrian Priority set-aside within the Surface Transportation Block Grant Program: Every single trip, regardless of traveler and destination starts as a walk trip, but historically our investments have ignored this basic fact. This set-aside should explicitly be for sidewalks, curb ramps, crosswalks, American with Disabilities Act transition plans, and roadway/street narrowing such as road diets that add missing sidewalks or improve crossing for pedestrian safety. Currently in Houston, the installation and maintenance of sidewalks is the responsibility of the property owner. At this time, we do not have the resources to take over that function, especially with having to do special designs in areas where we have open ditches.
- Incorporate funding for resiliency: Incorporating the 100-year level of service drainage into a project can increase our project costs as much as 30%. However, a critical part of investing in infrastructure that supports Houston communities is designing facilities that improve both access and resilience. Green stormwater infrastructure, impervious surfaces and detention are elements that must be added to Houston streetscapes. This resilience is particularly important for infrastructure within existing underserved communities. Socially vulnerable residents face greater challenges recovering from extreme events. Those recovery costs fall to Federal, state, and local governments. Houston's goal is to proactively avoid those recovery costs with more

⁸ Houston-Galveston Area Council Livable Centers Planning Studies <https://www.h-gac.com/livable-centers/planning-studies>

⁹ National Association of City Transportation Officials (2021) Cities Priorities for the 2021 Surface Transportation Bill https://nacto.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NACTO_2021-Priorities-for-American-Transportation.pdf

¹⁰ National Association of City Transportation Officials (2021) Making Federal Funding Work for Cities <https://nacto.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Making-Federal-Funding-Work-for-Cities.pdf>

resilient infrastructure. As the new transportation bill is complemented, there needs to be considerations of increased funding for resiliency.

Conclusion

As a keeper of the roadways in Houston, I have a responsibility to the public. Mayor Turner has called for a paradigm shift. This paradigm shift includes taking affirmative steps to right historical injustices by designing a multi-modal transportation network that is inclusive of all people and needs. I recognize every decision today will impact future generations.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important topic. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

memo.