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It's Time for Transportation Equity

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Social justice organizing brought me to USF to study **Urban and Regional Planning** with a focus on transportation. After knocking on doors across Hillsborough County and having conversations with regular people about their daily lives and struggles, it became incredibly clear that many of our communities are the living result of generations of injustice. These injustices were largely perpetrated by those in power, from local City Council, County Commission and School Board, all the way up to those in the Federal government who generate and approve our country's budgeting priorities.

When we think of social justice, we don't always immediately think about transportation, but we should. Urban renewal policies and associated highway construction fractured black neighborhoods and wiped out entire black main streets like Central Avenue in downtown Tampa and the Deuces in downtown St. Pete. A massive amount of displacement occurred between 1950 and 2000, peaking in the 1960s after the passing of the Interstate and Defense Act of 1956. Fast-forward to when I was door-knocking right around the 2016 election, and a lack of adequate or reliable transportation was often cited by residents as a cause of major stress and set-back. Today, history is repeating itself. At the same time that I was having these conversations, a six-billion-dollar tolled highway expansion project called the Tampa Bay Express (TBX) was being proposed by the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) to go straight through the same disadvantaged Tampa neighborhoods that I was talking to. It was clear to me that the way transportation is currently being planned in Hillsborough County is still causing harm to large groups of already disadvantaged people. But why?



With my Urban and Regional Planning Master's Thesis, I sought to answer that question with the intent of proposing some possible steps towards improving the quality of life for historically disadvantaged groups of people through transportation planning. My research question was, "to what extent are transportation planning agencies in Hillsborough County considering social equity in their plans and processes" and my hypothesis was that "in order to improve social equity outcomes, transportation planners must make social equity an explicit goal and add social equity performance measures and targets to their plans." The study was action research, which is a type of research that I learned about in Dr. Robin Ersing's Research Methods course. Action research is a type of qualitative study that is performed with the intent of generating action through policies and programs rather than a study performed out of pure scientific curiosity.

I crafted a three-part project to build a triangulated picture of the extent to which planning agencies consider (and are able to consider) social equity. Interviews with representatives of the five main transportation planning agencies in Hillsborough County—FDOT, the Hillsborough County Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), the City of Tampa's Transportation and Stormwater Services Department, Hillsborough County's Public Works Department, and the Hillsborough Area Regional Transit (HART) bus system—provided insight into the day-to-day process of transportation planning. Interviews with representatives of disadvantaged communities, including the Hispanic community of Wimauma, African communities in East and West Tampa, and two organizations who work with low-income individuals and the houseless, WellBuilt Bikes and the Hillsborough Organization for Progress and Equality (HOPE), painted a picture of the specific outcomes of transportation planning experienced by people in Hillsborough County. Finally, an analysis of the planning documents used by the "big five" agencies provided an understanding of whether or not equity is an actual stated goal of these transportation planning agencies and what they have committed to doing to achieve those goals.

Several striking lessons emerged from the research.

- One, that social equity is rarely considered during transportation planning and when it is, it is poorly defined and almost never measured in terms of how it improves or worsens over time.
- Two, that there are very few consequences written into state and federal law for how transportation planning is to be done with regard to social equity; the two ways that agencies might be held accountable for causing harm are by being sued by a citizen or entity, or by being publicly humiliated.
- Three, that the community and those that make and implement plans for the community have entirely different definitions of success. For example, community representatives spoke negatively about several of the same major transportation projects that agency representatives spoke about positively, such as the roundabouts on 40th Street, bike/ped improvements to Floribruska Avenue associated with closing down the highway exit there, and the Weed and Seed program.
- Four, that justice is not an explicit goal of any of these transportation planning agencies. The word "equity" was nowhere to be found in any of the plans' goals.
- Five, that elected officials make all of the final decisions no matter how much their staff, constituents or advising agencies might recommend taking justice into account; and
- Six, that the availability of funding is the top-cited reason by transportation agencies for why justice is not considered to a greater extent in transportation planning.

Finally, what I believe is the most important finding from the research is that when people organize effectively, they have influence over those decisions. There are some key ways that citizens can make a bigger impact on decisions. For example, HART takes citizen feedback more seriously when people show up in-person to Board meetings to state their needs. Elected officials feel more confident in making decisions based on citizen feedback when a lot of people have one unified message rather than several disjointed demands. The professionalism demonstrated by a constituent while making a request makes Hillsborough County more

inclined to allocate money to their project. Persistence and media coverage are also key. For example, when Tampa residents organized and formed the Sunshine Citizens, they were able to push the FDOT to press "reset" on the TBX project, taking several segments of the project off the table. The TBX protest also effectively pushed FDOT to improve their citizen engagement techniques overall.

My thesis covers these lessons, and more, including a set of "Mobility Equity Indicators" that I developed in order to qualitatively measure the extent to which a transportation agency is taking social equity into account. Programs and policies of the past are why people are hurting, and it is time for government agencies to take responsibility and fix those actions through new policies and programs today. [Download my thesis](#) for more information.