Looking at Equity Through a Different Lens

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"Remedying four centuries of slavery, of segregation, and of inequity of opportunity is no simple matter," wrote Pulitzer Prize winning historian Jon Meacham in his book titled *His Truth Is Marching On* about the late Rep. John Lewis and the 1965 march in Selma, Alabama.

"Nor can America attain racial, economic, and political justice in only one way," he continued. "When the nation sees itself differently, it enhances its capacity to act differently."

As we approach the end of Black History Month, I want to share some of what I am hearing from our members and partner organizations about how we can see ourselves differently and act differently for greater equity. We can start with an honest look at our history.

Historical Winners and Losers

Like most of you, I chose a career in public transportation because I believe that mobility can change lives, give people access to opportunities, and improve the quality of life. We are solutions-providers; we think of transit as an egalitarian equalizer in society.

APTA has published several studies over the years that show how transit investment creates jobs, generates a 5 to 1 economic return, increases property values, and makes communities healthier and safer. Where public transportation goes, communities ***do*** grow.

Sadly, this has not been true for everyone.

“We have a legacy of investment happening at the expense of communities of color,” U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said this week. He acknowledged the federal government’s role in helping to build a transportation system that frequently cut off minority neighborhoods from economic opportunities.

“We recognize how misguided investments and missed opportunities for federal transportation policies have reinforced racial and economic inequality,” he stated in committing his agency to advance greater equity.

Public transportation’s history mirrors that of our nation, the heroic and the regrettable. In too many places there are two public transportation systems with different standards for riders who *choose* to use transit and those who are *dependent* on it. “Suburban” and “choice riders” are generally White and from a wealthier tax base; “urban” and “dependent riders” are generally Black and lower income. These are separate and unequal systems, whether by design or default.

Our industry – from planning, funding, design, scheduling, and vehicle fleet choices – has been influenced by inherited, structural racism. This is not to single out public transit; our decisions often were influenced by non-transit issues such as mortgage lending, zoning, business investments, and the allocation of local resources.

No less than any other segment of society, there are places where public transportation spending has been shaped by the era of re-segregation after the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Between 1960 and 1964, White support for the idea that the government should ensure a minimum standard of living for every American plummeted from 70 percent to 35 percent. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was intended to prohibit discrimination and ensure all people, regardless of race or income, have access to transit. In practice, however, the law has been more about minimal compliance to “do no harm” rather than about rectifying long-standing inequities.

Failing to align public transit services with the populations that rely on them most is not just a deficiency in transit planning but a barrier to equity. “Public transportation funding decisions are a direct reflection of who we value in society … who we believe is worth investing in,” said Dorval Carter, president of the Chicago Transit Authority and APTA Board member, in an address to the Transportation Research Board earlier this year.

In truth, when benefits are available to everyone equally, the results are more employment, higher wages, better funded schools and public services, and improved access to transit. According to a 2020 study, Citigroup calculated that if we had adopted policies to close the economic gap between Black and White Americans 20 years ago, U.S. Gross Domestic Product would have been $16 trillion higher.

APTA's Action Plan

Addressing racism requires all of us to be an active part of the solution. In the latter part of 2020, APTA's Diversity and Inclusion Council's Racial Equity Working Group began to explore how our association could have a truly transformational impact in supporting APTA members' racial equity efforts.

The result of that months-long mission is the **APTA Racial Equity Action Plan**, a blueprint of specific activities, metrics, and desired outcomes. The plan's five goals are to:

1) **Measure and recognize progress on racial equity in the transit industry** by providing APTA members with a tangible roadmap for advancing equity in their own organizations.

2) **Offer programs, technical support, and new resources** to help individuals and organizations develop practices and policies that support racial justice and equity.

3) **Create more mentorship, sponsorship, and engagement opportunities** for transit students, transit professionals, and transit-related businesses.

4) **Be an influential advocate for equity in transit** by promoting inclusion and diversity in leadership positions at transit agencies, transit-related businesses, and relevant boards of directors, as well as in the equitable delivery of transit industry goods and services.

5) **Implement purposeful programs dedicated to equity, diversity, and inclusion** and that support the mission of APTA and its Racial Equity Action Plan.

Additional Ideas

The public transportation industry has done more than most sectors to provide equitable access to opportunities, solicit diverse voices and views, hire workers who represent the communities they serve, and foster open dialogue.

Our members, both transit agencies and businesses, are doing remarkable things to advance equity through workforce development initiatives and by creating a safe environment for courageous conversations. Racial equity is becoming a fundamental element in their decision-making. More frequent routes are being added to under-served, densely populated urban areas, and resources are being targeted to where they are needed most, regardless of zip code. APTA's Racial Equity Action Plan will be collecting and sharing many of these best practices.

In listening to transit leaders and business executives around the country, I am encouraged by what is happening. Here are a few ideas that deserve special focus:

- **Connect All Customers with Decision-Makers:** Calling for community involvement and holding public meetings is often not enough. APTA-member transit agencies are working with neighborhood organizations and local activists to ensure historically disenfranchised populations have a voice. Making transit equitable means listening to *all* riders and *all* communities.

- **Prioritize Transit Resources for Vulnerable Communities:** Some public transportation agencies are improving service in specific non-White neighborhoods where transit is the lifeline to jobs, healthcare, and an education. Creating a more equitable transportation system means re-evaluating priorities to focus on the people for whom transit is the only mode of mobility.

- **Support Broad Investment in Low-Income Communities:** Transit and business leaders are partnering with technical schools, medical and research facilities, grocery stores and retailers, and investors to plan capital projects that can create jobs, training opportunities, and affordable housing. This underscores why it is so important to bring diverse, non-transportation interests to the table -- from the start.

- **Question How Decisions Are Made and Consider the Hidden Consequences:** Transit agencies are developing equity assessment tools to review how they provide service. Why are shelters provided on some routes but not others? Why are safe pedestrian walkways a priority in select places but not others? They are also examining how transit decisions impact other issues, such as housing prices and the displacement of low-income populations, easy access to jobs, and fare enforcement versus policing.

Transit Equity Is Racial Equity

The history of civil rights in America has always been tied to the issue of equity in transportation. “Building back better” begins with acknowledging the systemic shortcomings in our past to prevent them from becoming part of our future.

This past year, the COVID-19 pandemic showed us how the lack of access to quality health care in minority communities made people more vulnerable to the ravages of the virus. At the same time, transit has been heralded as “an essential service,” critical to the functioning of our cities and towns. As an industry, we need to reconcile these two realities.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion open our eyes to the promise of a better future.

As our APTA family works for greater fairness in mobility, I hope the words of John Lewis will inspire us to keep the spirit of Black History Month alive throughout 2021 and beyond:

“I think there’s something brewing in America that’s going to bring people closer and closer together. We have to go forward as one people, one family, one house.”

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