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Phillip A. Washington 
Chief Executive Officer 
Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority 
One Gateway Plaza 
Los Angeles, CA 90112-2952

RE: Importance of Public Health and Equity

Dear Mr. Washington:

Thank you for the invitation to provide comments on a public health and equity framework for transportation planning. We particularly appreciate this opportunity given the strong link between transportation and health. Transportation system design and priorities have important influences on people’s health and the health of a community. For example, transportation systems that provide abundant opportunities and incentives for walking and biking have great potential for helping people achieve recommended levels of physical activity, thereby reducing risks of heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. Conversely, increased time spent in a car has potential adverse health effects. For example, one study found that each additional hour spent in a car per day is associated with a 6 percent increase in the likelihood of obesity.\(^1\) In addition, designing transportation networks that prioritize safety has great potential for reducing traffic-related injuries, the second leading cause of premature death in the county population.

Below are important principles and strategies to consider in developing an equitable framework for transportation planning and investment that protects and promotes health while reducing the stark disparities in health that we see across the many communities of Los Angeles County.

1) **Consider prioritizing resources according to communities of greatest need.** In many communities across the country, policies, programs, and funding streams have led to an inequitable distribution of resources and disinvestment in certain areas, resulting in a large “health gap” between advantaged and disadvantaged communities. Increasing mobility in communities of greatest need has the potential to improve access to education,

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employment, medical care, and other health promoting opportunities, thereby having significant potential to reduce health disparities.

2) **Use an evidence-based screening tool to identify communities of need.** A tool that measures **cumulative community disadvantage** and includes indicators of economic security, educational and employment opportunity, community violence, neighborhood quality, and population health is advantageous in identifying communities of need. The CalEnviroScreen (CES), developed by the California Environmental Protection Agency (CalEPA) is a commonly used tool to identify disadvantaged communities. However, this tool focuses to a large degree on sources of **environmental pollution** and does not sufficiently incorporate important social determinants of health.

One tool that measures cumulative community disadvantage, the Health Disadvantaged Index, has been developed by the Public Health Alliance of Southern California (Alliance). We would be happy to provide you with additional information about this screening tool upon request.

3) **Engage residents in identifying the needs of the most vulnerable users of transportation systems.** To better understand travel needs and behaviors in disadvantaged communities, we recommend that Metro use a structured approach to engage residents. The approach should specify key decision points for projects, analyze existing data and community feedback, and describe how the critical needs that are identified will guide future analyses and decision-making. The Public Participation Plan for “Plan Bay Area 2017” could serve as a starting point for this community engagement approach. Some key questions to consider while developing projects include:

- Is the majority of the population students, seniors, or people that cannot drive?
- Does the population primarily speak a language other than English?
- What are the key destinations of residents in the area and regionally?
- How do residents currently travel in and out of their community?
- How is the transportation system working and not working to meet residents’ daily needs?

4) **Promote active transportation.** Prioritizing investments in active modes of transportation, such as biking and walking, could have a significant positive public health impact by increasing opportunities for physical activity, thereby reducing chronic diseases associated with physical inactivity. This investment would also support the approximately 85% of Metro’s bus riders and 67% of train riders that currently get to their stop or station by walking or bicycling. Los Angeles County registered voters strongly support redirecting government funds toward improving walking, bicycling, and transit

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2 The Alliance represents nine Southern California health departments working to prevent chronic disease through upstream policy, systems and environmental change.
4 Metro Customer Survey Results, May 2014. [http://thesource.metro.net/2014/05/06/results-for-metros-biannual-on-board-survey/](http://thesource.metro.net/2014/05/06/results-for-metros-biannual-on-board-survey/) (accessed 8/20/15)
Finally, prioritization of active transportation to promote non-driving trips will have the additional benefits of reducing air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.5

5) **Include equity-based performance measures to guide transportation investments.** A framework can include equity-based performance measures to guide the types of projects that could be funded with additional resources and how future projects put forward for consideration will be evaluated. It is advantageous to include an equity analysis of how future investments will impact disadvantaged communities, and how future projects will help achieve Metro’s already adopted policy goals. The equity framework could also address how additional resources can continue to support mobility options for residents in disadvantaged communities. This could include preserving low transit fares; opportunities for monthly or annual passes based on income; and free transit passes for K-12 students which could lead to less truancy.7

Thank you for your consideration of these public health and equity framework principles and strategies for transportation planning. If you have any further questions or comments, please do not hesitate to contact me or Jean Armbruster at 213-351-1907 or jarmbruster@ph.lacounty.gov.

Sincerely,

Paul Simon, M.D., M.P.H.
Director, Division of Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention

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