

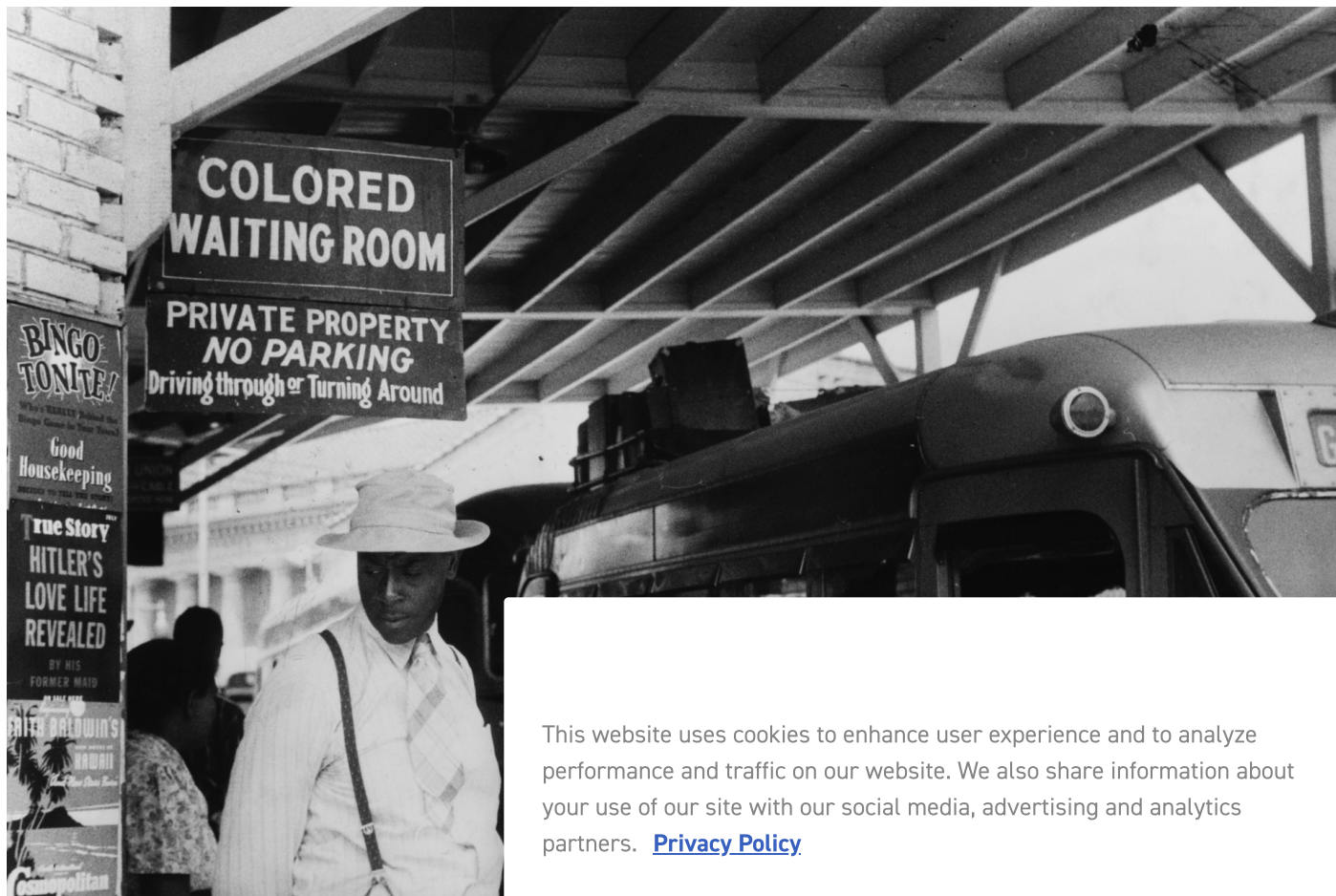


## MAGAZINE

### OPINION

# How Planes, Trains and Automobiles Worsened America's Racial Divide

For decades we've built racial inequities into our roads, subways and sidewalks. Better transportation policies now could play a big role in dismantling structural racism.



Library of Congress

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By STEPHANIE GIDIGBI

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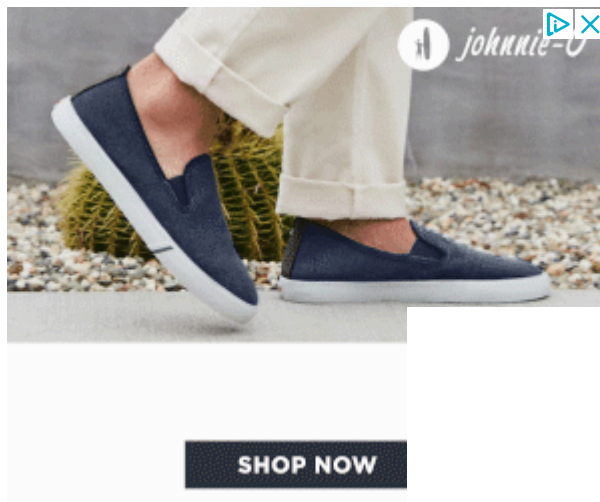


*Stephanie Gidigbi is a member of the board of directors of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority and also works as director of policy and partnerships with the Healthy People & Thriving Communities program at the Natural Resources Defense Council.*

**I**n this summer's renewed national debate over civil rights, attention has focused on the Senate's police reform debate — an effort by Washington to show it can respond to the eruption of public anger this summer over structural racism in American policy.

But in the larger quest for justice, there's another bill on the agenda that could also be crucial to rectifying some of the 20th century's most deeply unfair policies: A transportation funding bill set for a vote in the House next week would help undo the injustice built into our highways, our roads and our sidewalks.

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At first glance, transportation  
central to the inequality debate

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We often gloss over it today, but much of the civil rights struggle centered on access to public transportation. The unfortunate *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision of “separate but equal” came about because Homer Plessy was ejected from a “whites only” train car and then fought for his rights in court. Rosa Parks’ protest sparked the Montgomery bus boycott after she refused to give her seat to a white passenger after a long day of work. Her resolve united leaders to demand systemic changes including that buses stop at each street corner in Black neighborhoods just as they did in white ones. Black residents organized carpools, an early example of ride-share, and made the long treks across segregated neighborhoods to avoid using the city buses, as their yearlong campaign sought broader civil rights such as fair access to jobs and opportunity. Later, the Freedom Riders withstood rogue violence of stunning ferocity to get the Southern states to uphold the law and integrate interstate bus travel.

Transportation spending decisions have also rewritten the story of American communities over the past hundred years—in ways that cost Black communities deeply and benefited white neighborhoods.

Federally funded highway construction bulldozed through established Black communities like [Parramore](#) in Orlando, Florida; working-class neighborhoods in Spokane, Washington; and a thriving southside neighborhood in Syracuse, New York. Building highways facilitated the “white flight” to the suburbs, leaving many urban neighborhoods abandoned and underfunded, and keeping schools and workplaces segre

In the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, the I-94 highway of the '60s slashed through the Roseville neighborhood in downtown St. Paul and home to many Black families and businesses. That destruction still reverberates in protests after the fatal shooting of George Floyd and the traffic stop.

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This is not just an obscure social critique: It's a finding endorsed by economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia. In a 2019 [research paper](#) that examined the reasons and impact of the Freeway Revolts against urban highway construction, the researchers concluded that the American history of road development systematically shifted prosperity from inner cities to suburbs: "Freeways caused slower growth in population, income, and land values in central areas, but faster growth in outlying area. These patterns suggest that in central areas, freeway disamenity effects exceeded small access benefits."

In other words: Cutting through communities helped spur suburban growth but destroyed urban communities.

Transportation inequities are not limited to our nation's roads. In St. Louis County, officials used federal funds to buy up property in the oldest African American community in Missouri. Many of the residents [moved](#) to the suburbs. The highway became an emblem of racial unrest after the 1968 riots and left for dead by officers.

Transportation policies that locked in higher levels of pollution linked that pollution to great

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lung disease among Black and brown people, making them more likely to die or suffer serious complications from Covid-19.

If transportation has been the engine of unfairness, it's also true that transport can — and should — be part of the solution.

Some of these solutions are specific and local. When I was an official in the Department of Transportation during the Obama Administration, we worked in cities like St. Paul and Syracuse to reconnect divided communities using overpasses and pedestrian bridges. Some of that work continues today. In part as a result of these efforts, many cities are experiencing a resurgence as young people choose urban living and the amenities of a vibrant, walkable community. (This can bring its own threat to Black and brown residents, however, as property values and rents rise along with an influx of the affluent.)

Still, at the national level, we need to correct deeper and longstanding inequities, like who gets to spend transit money, and how to ensure healthier futures for the Black communities that ended up on the wrong end of 20th-century planning.

Thankfully, there is momentum in Congress to tackle these issues. The INVEST in America Act, which was marked up in the House this month and then folded into a broader House infrastructure bill, would increase funding for mass transit by \$105 billion over five years and allow communities to direct more funding to build safe, low-stress bicycle and pedestrian networks. While “Infrastructure Week” has become a punch line in Washington, given the stresses our nation is facing, this should be the time the Senate takes it up and passes an ambitious measure.

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Three core issues that affect racial equity are addressed in this bill. First, the legislation would give local communities the authority to decide what they want to spend their transportation funding on, providing greater leeway to support mass transit expansion. Second, it would expand investments in clean transportation options, including pedestrian options, subways and electric-vehicle charging systems. And third, it would cut toxic air and carbon pollution and help communities prepare for the severe weather we can expect because of climate change.

As the examples from St. Paul and Syracuse show, federal decision-makers can easily bulldoze local concerns. Local leaders, though, usually cannot. Giving local and regional leaders the ability to invest in more transit and pedestrian-friendly development could help spur urban redevelopment—and cut harmful air pollution.

Black and brown residents rely on mass transit, especially buses, [more](#) than white residents do, and so targeting these investments is a key change from pouring almost all federal dollars into highways and bridges. Connecting more of those communities via mass transit would cut travel times and allow more residents to get to work — or to visit family and friends—without incessant frustration and delay.

In addition, tailpipe pollution disproportionately affects low-income communities. Spurring the expansion of electric vehicles also need to continue to make

Lastly, we know from watching Hurricane Katrina and House color are also most likely to suffer why we need to use federal funds

transportation and hold states accountable for slashing those emissions. We

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transportation and hold states accountable for slashing those emissions. We

also need funding to prepare for the stronger storms, more intense flooding and hotter heat waves that we can expect from climate change. The infrastructure bill in the House, with the INVEST in America Act as part of it, would do both of those.

It's time to divest from the racist legacy of our past and invest in a more just and equitable future.

We need to correct the injustices of policies like redlining that continue to keep communities of color confined to toxic "sacrifice zones" of polluted air and water, and more vulnerable to flooding. And we must invest in a clean energy future that's more inclusive, creates new jobs, and tackles the challenges of climate change. This includes tax credits that make homes more affordable and buildings energy efficient. It's an opportunity to ensure greater access to clean, safe and affordable drinking water by replacing our aging lead pipes and other water infrastructure. We need to ensure housing is affordable, energy efficient and accessible to transit and pedestrian options. Building our cities and town in this way is both a climate strategy and an equity strategy.

Transportation is not a side issue in our national reckoning with race. Let's not miss our chance to be arc benders for justice—this is our time to recognize the humanity in one another, learn from our past and build new pathways that ensure we all thrive.

**FILED UNDER:** OPINION

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