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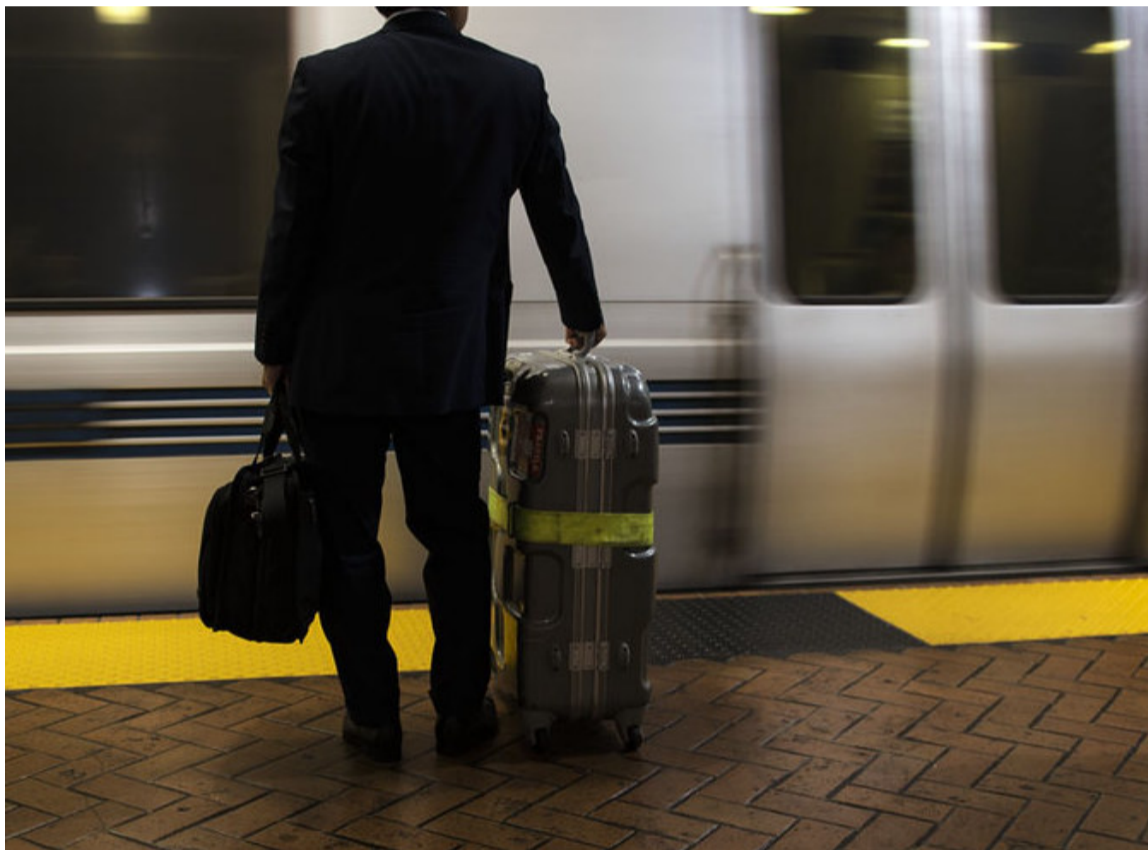
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Why the electric vehicle industry should care about racial justice

By **Katie Fehrenbacher**   July 8, 2020

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With many official fireworks shows canceled last weekend, the "people's fireworks" lit up neighborhoods all over the country, including my own. The trend seems oh-so-American in this unique time: spirited; defiant; and self-destructive. It was fun to watch from my San Francisco balcony and then not-so-fun to read about the inevitable fires and injuries the morning after.

As Americans celebrated our institutions over the weekend — amidst a disturbing escalation in coronavirus case counts — I've been thinking a lot about the past, present and future of America's transportation systems.

Here's the reality of the present: The pandemic has caused a crisis of epic proportions for public transit. In my neck of the woods, San Francisco Municipal Transit Agency Director of Transportation Jeffrey Tumlin last week laid out SFMTA's budget for the next two years. He said without new funding sources, and more federal help, many (48 out of 60) of San Francisco's bus lines simply could disappear.

This unfortunate situation is likely to disproportionately affect the city's disadvantaged communities, many of which rely on public transit to get to work and their kids to school. Crumbling public transportation options also will lead to an increase in transportation-related carbon emissions, as people return to commutes with single-occupancy vehicles.

Slashed public transit routes are also the latest example of transportation racism. Our transportation institutions are so intertwined with society's systemic inequality that they can — if not thoughtfully managed and funded — perpetuate those inequalities.

" Urban planners follow the path of least resistance, and historically that's been excluding Black and Latinx communities from having a say in how their neighborhoods are developed. "

As Robert Bullard, a professor at Texas Southern University, told NPR (I'm paraphrasing): Urban planners follow the path of least resistance, and historically that's been excluding Black and Latinx communities from having a say in how their neighborhoods are developed.

America has a long history of transportation racism — from building highways through low-income areas to excluding minority groups from mobility planning decisions to building pollution-spewing truck distribution centers in disadvantaged communities. Unfortunately, all of those policies are not just "history." They are very much alive and present in the transportation systems of today.

The good news is that many city transportation planners are well aware of the equity battle they're fighting, and there have been a lot of big strides in making sure certain cities are addressing this problem.

The city of Oakland has been a leader in trying to redistribute transportation-related funding in a more equitable manner. For example, the city's pothole program has prioritized fixing roads in disadvantaged communities over wealthy neighborhoods in the hills of the East Bay (much to the consternation of those wealthy communities).

Some recent inspiring regulations in the works are focused on reducing air pollution caused by fossil-fuel-burning vehicles in low-income communities.

One is the California mandate I highlighted last week: The Advanced Clean Truck rule, which calls for all zero-emission trucks by 2045. Some of the most vocal advocates calling for the approval of this rule came from environmental justice groups, which are concerned about communities that live around ports and big distribution centers such as the ones run by Amazon. At these buildings, it's common for thousands of diesel-burning trucks to idle around the clock.

At the federal level, House Democrats introduced a sweeping climate action plan that would "begin to repair the legacy of environmental pollution that has burdened low-income communities and communities of color for decades. It calls for 100 percent clean cars by 2035. It won't likely pass into law, but the proposed legislation highlights the growing concern and connection between transportation emissions, climate and racism.

The nationwide Black Lives Matter protests — which continue day-after-day in communities across the globe — might not seem as if they have anything to do with electric cars or low carbon fuels. But the protests will continue to help shine a spotlight on the ingrained connection between inequality, climate justice and transportation.

We'll be tackling transportation equity and other topics at our annual VERGE 20 conference, a week-long online event the last week in October focused on accelerating the clean economy.

This article is adapted from GreenBiz's weekly newsletter, Transport Weekly, running Tuesdays. Subscribe here.

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