

Executive Summary

Decades after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the United States remains a nation sharply divided by race and class. In the transportation sector, low-income and minority communities have been shown to carry more than their fair share of the system's burdens and experience inequalities in the public participation process. The Wilmington Area Planning Council (WILMAPCO) has long been cognizant of these concerns—far exceeding federal mandates to weave Environmental Justice (EJ) into our planning process. Equity is a factor in all relevant studies and plans our public outreach process, and our regional project prioritization process. But we can and should do more.

The *2009 Transportation Equity Report: An Environmental Justice Study of the WILMAPCO Region* provides a fresh, comprehensive analysis of the burdens and inequities our region's low-income and minority communities face. It makes practical recommendations to break these infrastructural and policy barriers. The study also considers ways to improve the public participation of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) and Low Literacy (LL) groups.

Most fundamentally, the current distribution of transportation funding creates a system that hinders mobility for many low-income and minority (or EJ) communities. EJ groups are more likely to use alternative forms of transportation than the rest of the population, specifically public buses and walking. Weak transit and non-motorized funding (in step with decades of highway-favorable land use decisions) has resulted in a transportation system that all too often does not meet the needs of EJ residents. Poor access to employment, food and medical care are documented by-products, as well as increased transportation expense. The present report puts forth several long-term recommendations to tackle these problems:

- Abandon the current tax structure, which generates transportation revenue based on gasoline purchased. Identify a dedicated stream for transit capital and operation funding.
- Check suburban sprawl; promote infill and redevelopment.
- Increase transit funding in the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) from 10% to 15-20%.
- Increase non-motorized transportation funding in the TIP from about 1% to 2-3%.

While WILMAPCO will continue to advocate for the realization of these recommendations, the main thrust of the report concerns short-term, cost-effective, infrastructure improvements and policy shifts that will improve the mobility and the public participation of our EJ communities.

We begin the report's analysis with an identification of "EJ neighborhoods" or areas of concentration of low-income and minority groups. These flagged neighborhoods are the foundation of the analysis. We divided our technical analysis of the EJ areas into three broad components: project funding equity, transit accessibility and connectivity and walkability.

WILMAPCO has tracked projects and their funding in EJ areas for several years. But our method has been limited to listing projects and their associated funding within EJ neighborhoods. The present study introduces an *equity benchmark*, a more meaningful assessment of equity in project distribution. Using the new benchmark, we found that while an equitable number of TIP projects have been sited in EJ communities since 2002, their associated funding is more often than not inequitably distributed. Moreover, both the location and the funding of recently completed transportation projects failed, more often than not, to meet our equity benchmark. This analysis underscores the need to direct greater and more consistent transportation investment within our low-income and minority communities.

Our transit accessibility and connectivity analysis is divided into several components: regional bus stop accessibility, connectivity of EJ areas to low-income employment centers and supermarkets, and a candid examination of the Delaware Paratransit system's impact on EJ. While overall our transit system provides good service to EJ areas, we identified several areas in need of improvement:

- Add new bus stops and/or route shifts in identified EJ neighborhoods where a high percentage of dwelling units are outside walking distance (one-quarter mile) to a bus stop.
- Add service (especially weekend) and improve route frequencies to identified low-income employment centers.
- Shift transit routes in identified EJ areas where a high percentage of dwelling units are outside reasonable walking distance to a bus route, which services a supermarket.
- Consider strongly the restructuring of Delaware's Paratransit system to eliminate trips which do not meet the requirements of the American's with Disabilities Act (ADA). Saved funding should be directed by the State towards improving the fixed-route bus system.

The final element of our technical analysis relates to walking and bicycling. We identified EJ neighborhoods with limited access to existing and proposed pathways and bike routes, tracked pedestrian and bicycle crash rates and, through an exhaustive field survey, visited over a dozen EJ areas to make "on the ground" non-motorized recommendations. Recommendations for improving non-motorized transportation within EJ neighborhoods are as follows:

- Consider routing new pathways and bike routes within or near EJ areas outside the network.
- EJ areas were home to a disproportionate percentage of pedestrian and bicycle crashes. Improve non-motorized safety within these neighborhoods and specifically at intersections with the highest crashes.
- Implement the over 500 individual non-motorized recommendations to improve walkability within EJ areas.

Following the technical analysis, the report turns to public participation and outreach. We survey our region's LEP and LL populations and make recommendations to improve the participation of these groups and the EJ communities in the transportation planning process. These recommendations include:

- Meet EJ goals set forth in WILMAPCO's Public Participation Plan, such as attending key ethnic festivals, reaching out to minority media, and tracking the distribution of our quarterly newsletter for equity.
- Form an EJ Work Group to help implement recommendations in the report.
- Reduce written communications in favor of alternatives (such as oral communications) when conducting outreach in LEP and LL areas.
- Conduct more in-depth studies of EJ communities, as we have done in the neighborhood of Southbridge in Wilmington.
- Continue to work towards addressing air quality concerns in EJ neighborhoods.
- Work with the Delaware Transit Corporation (DTC) to translate bus schedules and key information into Spanish.
- Expand outreach to non-traditional venues, such as Laundromats and grocery stores.

The report ends with a series of strategies to both monitor and fund its recommendations. Our Regional Progress Report is identified as the primary vehicle to monitor EJ-related data trends. And while WILMAPCO does not function as an implementation agency, in an era of continuing economic constraint, we recommend the full exploration of alternative funding streams to implement the study's recommendations.