



On Transit Policy, City Leaders Have More Power Than They Think

State and federal policies often get in the way of transportation planning, but they don't have to. A new field guide shows how cities can take charge.

LINDA POON | [@linpoonsays](#) | Mar 16, 2017 | [1 Comment](#)

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This post is part of a CityLab [series on power](#)—the political kind, the stuff inside batteries and gas tanks, and the transformative might of mass movements.

Installing dedicated bus lanes, building pedestrian-friendly streets, and reaching Vision Zero; it's the kind of talk that tickles the urbanist's fancy. But it takes so much to implement even the smallest of transit improvements that it's easy for mayors and other city officials to avoid it all, afraid that they're at the mercy of state and [federal](#) governments.

But when it comes down to it, all transportation is local. That's the message from [a new field guide for city officials](#), published Wednesday by the nonprofit TransitCenter. "No matter what happens, cities can make progress by creating an environment where transit works for more people and where walking and biking are viable ways to get around," lead author Steven Higashide said at a press briefing.

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Indeed, some of the most transformative transit improvements have come from the city level. The national model today may be the grand effort of turning Times Square into a vibrant [pedestrian plaza](#) in New York City, but something as simple as painting polka dots on the ground—[as Austin did](#)—can make a big difference, too. Citing examples of successful initiatives from dozens of cities, big and small, the guide lays out key principles for city leaders to consider when embarking on new transportation projects.

Leadership matters

City officials may not be able to handpick who runs their state (or federal) government, but choosing the right leaders at the local level goes a long way to determining whether transit initiatives succeed. That's no surprise, but "this

has less to do with formal credentials and more about having the right skillsets and philosophies,” Higashide said. For example, someone could secure alternative funding sources by thinking about transportation as not just an infrastructure challenge, but as part of a larger issue about access to jobs, safety, or clean air. The handbook also emphasizes the need for leaders to be open to experimenting with “quick-build” improvements—using semi-permanent materials to extend sidewalks, for example, and create pedestrian plazas.

Find the right alliances

It’s true that with the federal government [turning a blind eye to issues like climate change](#), and with outdated standards at the state level, implementing greener transit projects will become much harder. But the right partnerships—with civic leaders, businesses, and even more importantly, the transit agencies—can help a mayor’s office work around those challenges. The alliances can help the city convince states to change their laws, find alternative funding (perhaps even via direct investments), and garner wider support for initiatives.

Make use of existing infrastructure

One of the key causes of congestion is the overabundance of parking ([even if it doesn’t feel like it](#)), as many cities were built with cars in mind. Parking not only takes up precious land space, but when priced too cheaply, it encourages driving. So the authors suggest that cities rethink their pricing strategy to discourage people from staying in a spot too long, causing other drivers to circle the block looking for spaces and adding to traffic congestion. At the same time, cities should also incentivize mass transit, which can change people’s traveling behavior in the long term.

Rewrite the rules

Even with an overabundance of parking, outdated parking minimums mean cities continue to add more of it when new developments crop up. The key here

is for mayors to rethink how to review new development projects, which might involve, for example rewriting the parking policy and reducing parking minimums (or in Buffalo’s case, [removing them altogether](#)), or amending zoning codes so that mass transit centers are a “walkable” distance from neighborhoods and businesses.

Despite the broad guidelines, there’s no one-size-fits-all solution. Take, for example, how different cities are encouraging people to take public transit. One approach comes from San Francisco, a city of 865,000 people (and growing) that’s been experiencing a building boom. During the press briefing, Higashide emphasized the city’s [recent law change](#) that awards more points for development projects that discourages driving by, say, offering discounted bus passes for tenants or including bike repair rooms inside a building.

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Meanwhile Ann Arbor, Michigan, a city of roughly 117,000 people, is tackling two problems—reducing parking demand and encouraging bus ridership—with one universal transit pass program called Go! Pass. The program, which gives workers unlimited rides on all public buses, is mostly funded with revenue collected through its existing parking spaces. A 2015 survey [found](#) that over a third of Go!Pass users would have driven alone to their jobs if the program didn’t exist.

Challenges to transportation differ from place to place, but the handbook also acknowledges that each city has its own unique set of tools to reaching the same goals. Read the entire guide [here](#).

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