

Assessing the Past & Current Impacts of the International Boulevard BRT Project in East Oakland

Findings and Recommendations **JANUARY 2020**

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The practice of transportation justice requires a courageous and honest assessment of both the negative and positive impacts to low income communities of color and people with disabilities from transportation projects and policies--past and present. This report is prepared with Just Cities in partnership with the Fall 2019 UC Berkeley City Planning Graduate Transportation Studio.

This report provides a preliminary analysis of currently available information and data regarding the past and current impacts of the East Bay Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Project on the people, environment, businesses and homes around International Boulevard (East 14th Street)--while providing critical insight behind the planning and development process. Report preliminary findings may change with additional information and future analysis.

Often, transportation projects and their impacts have been framed in narrow, siloed terms, ignoring the broader history of places and the people within them. We aim to broaden this lens and help provide documentation in order to preserve this history for the future.

Preliminary Findings:

Siloed Transportation Planning

We found throughout our research and interviews the recurring theme of siloed communication and actions from different agencies involved in the project. Different agencies, and even different departments within the same agency, work on their own timelines with their own processes and often don't coordinate. In addition, funding constraints from different funding sources placed limitations on what specific funding could be used for. For example, FTA funds were only allowed for BRT construction, not for business mitigation or public realm improvements such as lighting, landscaping, and new sidewalks. As a result, throughout the project, there was a lack of accountability that led to a blame game of who is responsible for what and who should address constituents' concerns from the beginning and throughout the process.

Disjointed Communication and Feedback

A theme in interviews and research was inconsistent community engagement. This was due partially to the dissolution of the Oakland Sustainable Neighborhoods Initiative, and shifting funding priorities from regional donors which lead to the non-profit transit Transform, which had been responsible for leading some organizing efforts among East Oakland community groups, unable to continue engaging in the process. Communication from AC Transit about the project - for example, focusing on headways and overall time savings, reasonings for the median bus boarding island, and focus on safety from crime - did not resonate with many residents. Communication around the construction timing, access to mitigation funds, and overall project design were limited.

Business and Construction Impacts

The BRT project is expected to create three hundred construction jobs. In addition, four hundred local jobs in retail, services, and manufacturing, all during the construction. Despite the strong job goals, it is difficult to track the current job achievements and determine whether the project is meeting the projected jobs. Construction has created an ongoing impact to businesses along the corridor, most common complaints are around access to the area, lack of parking; both appear to contribute to slow business for merchants along the corridor. Furthermore, a business assessment conducted in 2015 concluded that 84% of businesses are minority owned and that 85% of business rent their space. Consultants doing business outreach have reported that some businesses are experiencing resistance from building owners to sign leases due to speculation of an increase in property value from the development.

Accessibility and Safety Challenges

International Boulevard is an auto-dominated corridor (and state highway); the current configuration of the road is extremely inhospitable to people who are not traveling in a car. Additionally, construction has exacerbated challenges particularly for people walking, biking or rolling along International.

The BRT presents a trade-off between accessibility and mobility for many constituents along the corridor. The BRT will reduce total bus stops on International by 40%. The average spacing between bus stops is one-third of a mile, so people with mobility challenges (such as seniors, parents with strollers, children and people who have pain while walking) may be disproportionately impacted by the extended spacing of bus stops.

Collisions, along with severe and fatal collisions, along International have steadily increased between 2007 and 2017 and International is part of Oakland's High Injury Network. Pedestrians are particularly vulnerable to dangerous exposure.

While median stations reduce the length traversed across an intersection (if a person needs to cross to the other side of the street to catch the bus), they may present crowding challenges and may increase real and perceived exposure to traffic along International.

Housing and Displacement Pressure

In July 2017, the San Francisco Business Times published an article stating that the 5 hottest neighborhoods in the Bay Area for home appreciation are in East Oakland based on Zillow data. The neighborhoods were North Stonehurst, St. Elizabeth, Highland, Columbia Gardens, and Lockwood-Tevis. Four of these neighborhoods border International Blvd. In our analysis, we find that median home values along International Blvd have increased more than in Oakland as a whole between 2012 and 2017 (118% vs. 96% respectively). Median rents along International Blvd have also increased significantly, although they are similar to increases across Oakland (49% vs 46% respectively). Most shockingly, our affordability analysis indicates that in 2017, a household making the median income for a renter household along International Boulevard (\$37,168/year) would have to spend 85% of their income to afford the median rent (\$2,619/month). This is an increase from 69% of household income spent on rent in 2012. These changes in income vs. rent are happening simultaneously as neighborhoods along International Blvd have decreased in the percent of people of color living along the corridor, most notably a 7.8% decrease in African-Americans and a 8.2% decrease in Asians. While the BRT has not opened for service yet, the BRT may have made the surrounding area more desirable and the BRT may exacerbate current trends of unaffordability.

Environmental Benefits For Whom?

East Oakland is home to historical environmental racism, and subject to significant pollution from Interstate 880, industrial land uses, the Oakland Airport and the Port of Oakland. While the BRT proposes improvements in air quality, access to affordable and vibrant transportation, and decreased greenhouse gas emissions, real questions about who will be able to enjoy these long-term benefits and who will bear the burdens of the costs remain. The debate over trees is a clear example - over 24% of the existing, mature trees were removed; while the project will ultimately plant 295 new trees (150%), these trees will not immediately produce the benefits of shade, increased air quality, and aesthetic contributions to the neighborhood, raising residents concerns about who these trees are “for.”

Preliminary Recommendations:

Rethinking Process

1. Community governance body

We propose creating systems for local, meaningful participation in planning processes - where information and evidence is provided to support informed and empowered community input and recommendations on planning decisions, with particular attention to access, considering language, mobility, financial, and scheduling barriers. Recent and active community governance models include the [Rockridge Community Planning Council](#) in Oakland, [Congress of Neighborhoods](#) in Los Angeles, the [Neighborhood Action Plans](#) in Minneapolis, and the [Strong Neighborhoods Initiative](#) in San Jose. These local community bodies will need to integrate with regional collaborative bodies for transportation planning.

2. Problem solving table

We propose the creation of an inter-agency and community problem solving table where agencies like AC Transit, EBMUD, the City of Oakland, and community representatives such as merchants and residents can come together to problem solve challenges during the planning and construction phases. A recent example of this was the Oakland Sustainable Neighborhoods Initiative (OSNI) in Oakland, in which community groups and city agencies collaborated on initiatives in East Oakland.

3. Regional infrastructure projects body

We recommend the establishment and/or appointment of a regional infrastructure projects coordinating body to preserve institutional memory across the entire life of a project, while being able to situate projects and make decisions from a more comprehensive, regional perspective. A regional body would include internal and external peer review and oversight of projects as they move through the pipeline and clear key milestones. Additionally, there must be rigorous, democratic appointment and compensation for community-level representation within the regional body.

Monitoring Impacts and Proactive Strategies for Social Equity

1. Accessible business mitigation funds

Approximately 333 businesses have declined technical assistance from business consultants, while others are reluctant to provide financial information, and overall find the process to the mitigation funds “long and cumbersome.” Also, businesses have expressed desire for funds to offer revenue

loss assistance as well.¹ Therefore, we recommended revising the mitigation funds requirement and process to offer an opportunity for impacted businesses to get an easier access to the funds. In addition, we recommend determining the social and economic vitality of the corridor by conducting a comprehensive count of businesses along International to adequately measure the impacts and benefits from the project.

2. Resident protections

We recommend implementing a number of resident protections along the corridor and/or throughout Oakland to reduce the potential for displacement. Some of these can include rent freezes, one-to-one replacement of demolished units, and a right to return policy. A forthcoming Just Cities report will outline some of these policies in more detail.

3. Transit rider improvements

While BRT presents a number of benefits, residents and transportation professionals we interviewed also identified other improvements that could have been made to the corridor and warrant current consideration moving forward. This includes exploring more politically difficult but worthwhile improvements such as fare integration across systems or even free bus services, and regular monitoring of services around the safety of median boarding islands, reviewing distance between stops, and fare box safety issues. With bus fares only representing 13% of system operating revenue for AC Transit, serious consideration for free AC Transit should be made.

Reimagining the Future of Transportation Projects

1. Equity impact analysis

We recommend that with any future transportation project- with significant impacts to the built environment and the consequent wellbeing of constituents- agencies, cities, and community groups must collaborate with communities to conduct an equity analysis during the planning phase (which is not traditionally done through the CEQA process). Such an analysis should recognize, respect and study the racial, socioeconomic, historic and cultural fabrics of communities in neighborhoods receiving and dealing with the burdens of project development. An example of this is the [Wood Street Project](#). The goal of an equity impact analysis is to proactively prevent, rather than mitigate, negative impacts from transit investments. The rewards of improved public transit should be accessible long-term and reaped by the constituents who would bear the brunt of the planning and construction process.

2. Broader transportation frameworks

BRT transportation projects are primarily designed as mobility investments. However, these types of projects require a broader vision, beyond improving mobility, BRT projects must be planned as projects that help shape a city. As such, BRT projects need to incorporate long-term vision for sustainable growth to maximize economic and social vitality in distressed neighborhoods with protections for long-term residents/small businesses. In addition, have stable financial model including capital, operations and maintenance (particularly for landscaping/streetscape improvements critical to existing residents), cost and schedule estimating. A broader vision may create the opportunity to address structural challenges that arise within the involved governmental agencies and foster a cohesive collaboration process across agencies and departments.

1. Eligible uses of funds: Building renovations, facade improvement, acquisition/creation of private parking, business model alterations, product offerings, business lines, customer base, etc.) and, absent a feasible retention plan, relocation.

3. Climate resilience planning

Transportation projects in the 21st century should be squarely focused on both their potential to mitigate climate change through reduced greenhouse gas emissions, as well as preparing and adapting to the locked-in effects of climate change, including metrics for displacement and life-cycle emissions calculations. Adaptation analyses should be conducted of vulnerabilities due to increased number of extreme heat days, air quality, drought, fires, and flooding due to sea level rise and groundwater inundation, with an emphasis on social resilience through access to quality education and jobs, housing security, and community safety.



Conclusion

As transportation planning students and professionals, we see transportation as fundamentally an issue of social justice, not just a question of ridership levels and fare revenue recovery. Infrastructure projects such as the East Bay BRT provoke tough questions for transportation planners about how to invest in communities that have been neglected without shepherding in gentrification and displacement, and how to equitably adapt and mitigate to climate change. East Oakland is being transformed by EBBRT, and at the same time Oakland as a whole is rapidly changing - increasing in population and development density, and starting to experience a preview of major effects of climate change, including wildfires, increasing heat, and flooding vulnerability from sea level rise. How these changes are planned for and implemented matters greatly.

Bus rapid transit is a concept that provides many potential benefits - the potential to bring increased reliability, speed, and frequency to marginalized, transit-dependent residents of Oakland, and to be part of a global and regional solution to reduce greenhouse gas emissions; but these potential benefits must be implemented correctly. Successful implementation requires transparency, trust-building and communication. Transportation and planning agencies have planned for decades for the investments in land use and transportation that this project are bringing to East Oakland, yet some community leaders say they have been planned upon, not planned with. Mitigation funds have not been deployed to help businesses. Tenant protections have not been as robust as needed to keep long time and low-income residents in place. The historical disinvestment and lack of attention to this area of East Oakland is reflected in many facets of the implementation of the EBBRT project.

East Bay BRT highlights how transportation projects woefully lack larger, systemic support for comprehensive, integrated and thoughtful planning protections for the people living and working in areas receiving these projects. Ultimately, the permanent impacts and benefits of EBBRT will be determined going forward - how success is monitored, how future investments are planned, and how historical injustices are corrected.