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The Role of Transportation in Fostering Economic Mobility in Northeastern Pennsylvania

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The Scranton Area Community Foundation (SACF), founded 63 years ago to promote change and growth in northeastern Pennsylvania, embarked on a series of community discussions more than a year ago to gather information about the region's opportunities for economic growth.

In nearly every discussion held by the SACF, access to reliable transportation was discussed as a necessary component of economic mobility and quality of life. Many residents in northeastern Pennsylvania — especially lower-income or elderly residents — couldn't access employment, were missing doctor's appointments, couldn't get their children to child care, and couldn't participate in social, religious, and cultural events, all as a result of the lack of transportation. Residents from the region who did not own a car were stuck — literally and figuratively — so the SACF and regional leaders and residents set out to address this problem together.

At the same time, members of the Philadelphia Fed's community development team heard similar reports that a lack of transportation was a barrier in northeastern Pennsylvania as well as several other parts of the Third Federal Reserve District. The team recognized that this topic would align directly with the Bank's newly launched Economic Growth & Mobility Project, and there was an opportunity to partner with the SACF to move the conversation forward.¹

Convening Regional Leaders

In January 2017, the Philadelphia Fed and the SACF

convened regional stakeholders to better understand the specific impediments to equitable access in current transportation systems and to explore opportunities to collaborate on a transportation strategy that would promote inclusive regional economic growth.

The group — now known as the Equitable Transit Planning Council — has met five times and has grown to more than 50 members. The council is intentionally diverse, representing stakeholders from many sectors — transportation, business, government, philanthropy, social services, and health care.

The council has worked to refine its mission and define short- and long-term goals. Its ultimate goal is to “enhance the quality of life for residents of the northeastern Pennsylvania community by improving equitable access to transportation.” The council's mission is “to advance the dialogue and actionable strategy around equitable transportation access in the northeastern Pennsylvania region through inclusive stakeholder engagement, building effective partnerships, leveraging additional resources, and seeking out and recognizing effective solutions.”

Why Focus on Equitability in Transit?

Equitability in transportation means ensuring that every person in a community — regardless of socioeconomic status or background — is able to access an affordable, safe, and reliable local transportation network and reach his or her full potential.

¹ More information about the Philadelphia Fed's Economic Growth & Mobility Project can be found at www.philadelphiafed.org/egmp.



The northeastern Pennsylvania community chose to focus on equitability because data and reported experiences demonstrated crucial links between transportation mobility and economic opportunity. Residents are unable to succeed when transportation barriers limit access to affordable housing, job opportunities, health care, education, and other services.

The Philadelphia Fed is interested in advancing research and engagement around transit and job accessibility. A lack of reliable and affordable transportation can be an instant barrier to employment. Without it, residents are unable to reach their full potential, and the region will not grow and thrive.² To this end, the Philadelphia Fed is providing quantitative and qualitative research

and sharing emerging strategies from other parts of the country. It has partnered with the Institute for Public Policy and Economic Development at Wilkes University to conduct focus groups of area residents to better understand the transportation challenges they face and to hear their ideas for solutions.

The SACF shares the Philadelphia Fed's commitment in building community capacity and promoting inclusive growth. The foundation believes that affordable, accessible transit is critical to a vibrant community, in which individuals are empowered with the necessary tools to improve their quality of life. As a community anchor institution, the foundation focuses on capacity building, including that of nonprofit organizations, as one of its key deliverables. Convening community leaders and residents of northeastern Pennsylvania around equitable transit is a way to focus on an issue that impacts inclusive growth across the region. Making equity a key component of that strategy falls in line with the foundation's priorities in the community.

Key Council Initiatives and Accomplishments

The Equitable Transit Planning Council, which has formed a number of working committees, has made notable progress in only a few months on several key initiatives:

- 1. Resource and asset mapping tool:** The Northeastern Pennsylvania (NEPA) Alliance, the Wright Center, and the SACF have collaborated to create a mapping tool identifying the relative accessibility of medical institutions and social service providers via the public transportation network. Key employers and educational institutions are being added to the map, and art and cultural institutions will be added later. See <https://arcg.is/10bTX0>.
- 2. Geisinger Health transportation access platform:** Geisinger Health System, which is represented on the council and is working with the alternative transportation subcommittee, will soon pilot an online platform that uses technology for ride coordination and connects residents to the public transportation network and private alternatives.

² See "The Intrinsic Value of Inclusive Growth," a speech by Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia President Patrick Harker, which highlights the importance of transportation for economic mobility, available at www.philadelphiafed.org/-/media/publications/speeches/harker/2017/06-02-17-the-intrinsic-value-of-inclusive-growth.pdf?la=en.

The pilot will have an urban (Scranton) and rural (Danville) rollout and, if successful, Geisinger will look to expand this effort across its system. The project also provides opportunities for shared learning on transit across different regions of the state. (It should be noted that Medicaid now covers nonemergency medical transportation costs; this provision has led health systems to consider ways in which they can support their patients' transportation needs. This federal regulation has already spurred private-sector transportation innovations that will be utilized as part of the pilot.)

3. NEPA Equitable Transit Summit:

A summit on October 17 will bring together national and regional experts to share emerging transportation strategies and best practices. Key topics include connecting communities to opportunity through transit, creating a comprehensive transportation system, building regional partnerships, and strengthening access to jobs and health care.

In addition, council members' networking has resulted in positive changes for the community and transit networks. Some regional leaders are finding an opportunity to work together for the first time. For example, Michael J. Hanley, chief executive officer of the United Neighborhood Centers (UNC) of Northeastern Pennsylvania, joined the mass transit subcommittee and developed a relationship with officials from the County of Lackawanna Transit System (COLTS). UNC's ability to obtain financing to redevelop a vacant property in Carbondale, PA, has been improved after COLTS agreed to provide bus service to the site when the development is completed.

Lessons Learned

Access to affordable and reliable transportation is an important aspect of economic mobility in northeast Pennsylvania and across the country. Through the community partnership model that has developed, the following lessons have been learned:

- **Cross-sector collaboration is critical to success.** A diverse group of stakeholders must be involved to make meaningful changes and implement lasting strategies in the transportation sector. Through council discussions, representatives from the different sectors are beginning to understand the respective sectors' priorities, terminology, and opportunities for potential funding sources. Bringing new voices and perspectives to the conversation will be important as the region begins the more challenging work of implementing identified solutions.



- **Complex issues require a long-term approach and ongoing commitment.** Transportation barriers and the creation of a more equitable system are complex challenges involving multiple systems and diverse groups of stakeholders. The solutions will take time to develop. Garnering initial successes and a few tangible "wins" will be key to sustaining momentum. The group will need to sustain its initial energy and use these new relationships to work together.
- **Solutions must emerge from and be led by the region.** The Philadelphia Fed and the SACF are the conveners or community quarterbacks of the initiative, but both organizations strongly believe that solutions must emerge from within the council. Ultimately, it will be up to regional leaders to decide what will have the greatest impact.

- **A combination of public transit networks and private-sector alternatives is needed to address residents' transportation needs.** Transportation solutions today look a lot different than they did even a decade ago. Online social networks and a greater acceptance of the so-called "shared economy" have led to new business models and alternative transportation models that do not necessarily require large infrastructure investments.³ In another important development, younger generations are more willing than their parents to forgo car ownership if public transit options are available. As northeastern Pennsylvania leaders discuss the future of regional transportation, solutions that may have seemed far-fetched a few years ago just might prove practical.

Next Steps

The NEPA Equitable Transit Summit on October 17, 2017, is a major milestone in the region's quest for transportation

arrangements that serve residents in better and more equitable ways. Shortly after the summit, the council will convene to determine the most effective way to implement its short- and long-term goals.

In addition, the council is beginning to explore how the community partnership model that has evolved in northeastern Pennsylvania can be replicated in other regions, especially those with small and medium-sized cities. The council plans to share its findings and experience for the benefit of other communities.

Further Information

For more information about the equitable transportation work underway in northeastern Pennsylvania, please contact Laura Ducceschi at ld@safdn.org, 570-347-6203, or at <http://www.safdn.org/>; or Erin Mierzwa at erin.mierzwa@phil.frb.org, 215-574-6641, or at <https://www.philadelphiafed.org/community-development>.

³ The shared economy includes shared-use mobility. The Shared-Use Mobility Center defines this focus as "transportation services that are shared among users, including public transit; taxis and limos; bikesharing; carsharing (round-trip, one-way, and personal vehicle sharing); ridesharing (carpooling, vanpooling); ridesourcing/ride-splitting; scooter sharing; shuttle services; neighborhood jitneys; and commercial delivery vehicles providing flexible goods movement." See <http://sharedusemobilitycenter.org/>.

