

From "What Exit" to One Region – Thoughts on Transportation Transformation

by Michelle Knapik



Michelle Knapik is program director for the environment at the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation.

Before I moved to New Jersey to work in an environmental position at the Dodge Foundation, I enjoyed a car-free, community-centric existence. For years, I walked to and from work through city neighborhoods and parks. Along my route, I picked up groceries and videos, met friends at restaurants, coffee shops, and museums, and talked with neighbors.

Today, I'm afraid to calculate the transportation-related increases to my environmental footprint. I relapsed into car dependency trying to get to my first interview at Dodge. I considered every combination of trains and buses, but when I compared the transaction costs of driving 1.3 hours versus more than four hours of transit, and a 1.2-mile walk on a road with no sidewalks, I broke down and rented a car.

Now, with obscenely high housing costs in Northern New Jersey, I live miles from my workplace, a reluctant auto- and petroleum-dependent person. I eat breakfast in my Prius (a small measure of guilt relief), sit in daily traffic for more than 45 minutes (one-way), contemplate the particulate matter emanating from trucks in front of me, and wonder if my legs will function when I finally get out of the car. We all know the prices we pay for this typical pattern of modern "mobility."

It's no secret that transportation policies have literally driven sprawl for decades. Yet, there is movement toward community-friendly transportation that reunites neighbors, contributes to strong local economies, advances public and environmental health and safety, and sparks social equity. This sustainable community vision drew me to the world of philanthropy, and I'm grateful to have found some pioneering colleagues in NJ, CT, and NY who put together the One Region Funders' Group as a way to leverage dollars and support cross-sector transportation reform.

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Before you dismiss the thought of joining a "transportation collaborative" based on the notion that there are not enough private dollars to fix the current system, consider this: the green-building industry, which is gaining market share at an astounding rate, is raising the transportation concept of "community connectivity" in its new neighborhood-design program, which means it is not far from reaching mainstream consciousness. We also see the NJ Department of Transportation embracing sustainable transportation through transit-oriented design, fix-it-first policies, and community-partnership approaches like "Context Sensitive Solutions (CSS)." The Federal Highway Administration, a big contributor to CSS, notes that a transportation facility designed through

this process "fits its physical setting and preserves scenic, aesthetic, historic and environmental resources, while maintaining safety and mobility."

This new direction has largely been fueled by the nonprofit sector, and New Jersey is a resource-rich state in this regard. One Region already backs the Tri-State Transportation Campaign and Regional Plan Association, and is aware that nontraditional advocates are emerging from the environmental, health, and social service sectors. One Region also sees opportunities to target funds for local capacity building – an area that receives few public transportation dollars. Here, the region's nonprofits can supply needed research; train and empower community leaders and planners; interface with officials, employers, and developers; and advocate for wholesale legislative change. One Region is headed in this direction, but more philanthropic partners will be needed to reach the tipping point that thrusts all communities to "Think Beyond the Pavement."

As I crawl along to GSP Exit 102, better known as "home," I think it's OK that I always fumble for an answer to the proverbial New Jersey "what exit" question when asked about my destination. I'm convinced that a "what exit" mentality will not move us toward sustainable development, but a One Region mentality just might.

For more information on One Region, please contact the Coordinator, Ann Fowler Wallace, at 617-524-9239 or afwallace@mindspring.com. ♦♦