



# FILLING THE GAPS

COMMUTE and the Fight for Transit Equity  
in New York City

SETH FREED WESSLER

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# **FILLING THE GAPS**

## **COMMUTE and the Fight for Transit Equity in New York City March 2010**

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# INTRODUCTION

## **STANDING AT THE HEAD OF A TABLE IN THE OFFICE OF YOUTH MINISTRIES FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE (YMPJ) IN THE SOUTH BRONX, COMMUNITY ORGANIZER JULIEN TERRELL**

opened a meeting of a dozen of the organization's middle and high school student members by asking how many people in the room ride the bus every day.

All of the young people raised their hands.

"So buses matter a lot to you all?" asked Terrell. They nodded their heads.

"Well what would you say if the city started cutting buses?" The room was silent.

New York City's buses are under siege. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), the New York State entity charged with operating the public transit systems in the region, has plunged into a sinking budget deficit by the financial crisis. In early 2009, the MTA responded by proposing to cut bus and train lines across the city, raise fares and even end subsidies for student fares. While advocates triumphed in pushing back most of the cuts at the time, the crisis remained, and a year later, New Yorkers once again face the prospect of widespread cuts to transit service. The proposed slashes would disproportionately impact low-income neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color like Bronx River and Soundview in the South Bronx where YMPJ—a faith based group that organizes "young people to become prophetic voices for peace and justice" to rebuild neighborhoods—makes its home.

On this particular day at YMPJ, Terrell and the group's members were talking about the proposed elimination of free subsidized bus and train cards for students. For low-income middle and high school students like these young people, the possibility of losing free transportation to school poses a serious threat to the maintenance of public education if the cost of getting to school becomes prohibitive for their families.

"They can't do that," said a 16-year-old YMPJ member sitting at the table. "That's how we get to school."

Without access to education, these young people and hundreds of thousands of others face a questionable future; their prospects of graduating and advancing to living wage jobs albeit foreclosed.

And, says Terrell, "Our neighborhoods are already the least well served by the city's transit system."

This South Bronx neighborhood and many other neighborhoods of color across the city have long had significantly limited access to the subway, the city's only form of rapid public transit. They rely disproportionately on a slow city-bus system, and the gaps in access create a barrier to employment opportunity for low-income communities of color.

"Anything that is going to prevent someone from getting to work or being able to hold on to that job is a serious issue," says Terrell. "These cuts just add insult to injury."

YMPJ is part of a fight to make transit equitable in New York. The group is a member of Communities United for Transportation Equity (COMMUTE), a coalition of community-based groups from all five New York City boroughs organizing for investments in public transportation that work for low-income New Yorkers and New Yorkers of color. For three years, COMMUTE has been



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one of the few voices consistently pushing for racial equity in the provision of transportation funding—a vision and agenda that most other advocates have tended to see as peripheral to larger concerns about environmental sustainability. It's become clear to many other transit advocates, however, that had the city and other groups followed COMMUTE's vision for a better New York three years ago, the whole city might very well be in a different situation when it comes to funding transportation.

In 2007 and 2008, New York City was enmeshed in a fight over the future of transportation funding. Progressive environmental groups, along with Mayor Bloomberg and others, joined together to advocate for congestion pricing, a revenue model that shifts costs for transportation to drivers during peak traffic hours. The plan needed approval from the State of New York since the MTA is a quasi-governmental state entity. Congestion-pricing advocates hoped the model could fully fund New York City's transportation needs while reducing car use and greenhouse gas emissions.

COMMUTE joined the congestion-pricing fight, but unlike the environmental groups, they argued that congestion pricing ought to be primarily focused on addressing the city's transportation gaps that scar communities of color. COMMUTE became the voice on transit equity in the congestion-pricing movement, while many others remained relatively silent on the significance of racial and economic justice. Their blindness to equity issues would come back to haunt the whole city.

The congestion-pricing opposition recognized the efficacy of framing transportation as an equity issue. Taking advantage of the equity-blind approach embraced by many of environmental groups, they adopted an active economic equity frame, claiming that increasing tolls on drivers would hurt low- and middle-income people in the New York City region. In truth, lower-income people in New York are less likely to drive,<sup>1</sup> but the argument gained traction, and in the end, led to the defeat of the proposal. The result is that the city's buses and trains may now face the axe. Everyone who relies on public transportation will feel the effects of this failure.

COMMUTE is now continuing its fight for transportation equity in New York by advocating for the implementation of a robust Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) that would crisscross the city with fast, reliable buses in the places currently lacking access to trains. According to Terrell, "We're not just fighting against something, but also for something. And that something is Bus Rapid Transit."

COMMUTE's plan takes racial disparities in transit access head on.

## TRANSIT INEQUITY

**MOVEMENTS FOR RACIAL JUSTICE IN THE UNITED STATES HAVE LONG ADDRESSED TRANSPORTATION.** In 1955, Montgomery bus boycotters organized to end racial discrimination and demand the hiring of more Black transit workers and the building of more bus stops in Black communities<sup>2</sup>. The Freedom Riders traveled American highways to protest Jim Crow. More recently, organizers have challenged racial profiling by focusing on the targeting by police of Black and Latino drivers, coining the phrase "driving while Black." These fights have focused on clear-cut forms of racial exclusion and discrimination, and have been key to the push for full inclusion and equal treatment for people of color.

Despite the removal of formal barriers to equal access to buses, the end of Jim Crow and an emergent awareness about racial profiling, communities of color are still disadvantaged by transit racism. Increasingly, this transit racism is insidious and silent. It emerges out of structural deficiencies and generations of racial discrimination in urban development, rather than from legal intent or individual bias. It foments deep inequities and erects massive barriers to opportunity for those who live in neighborhoods of color.

About 80 percent of the funding from the Federal Surface Transportation Act (FSTA) is allocated to highways and other car-oriented transportation, while just 20 percent is dedicated to public transit.<sup>3</sup> People of color are more likely than whites to rely on public transportation. Because such a small percentage of federal dollars is invested in public transit, the burden of funding transportation rests disproportionately on those who ride buses and trains as opposed to drivers, despite the fact that drivers in the region are a higher-income demographic.<sup>4</sup> The current funding model for transportation in New York leaves public transit riders paying 55 percent of the cost of their ride through the fares rather than through other revenue models. This is the highest rate of anywhere in the country.<sup>5</sup>

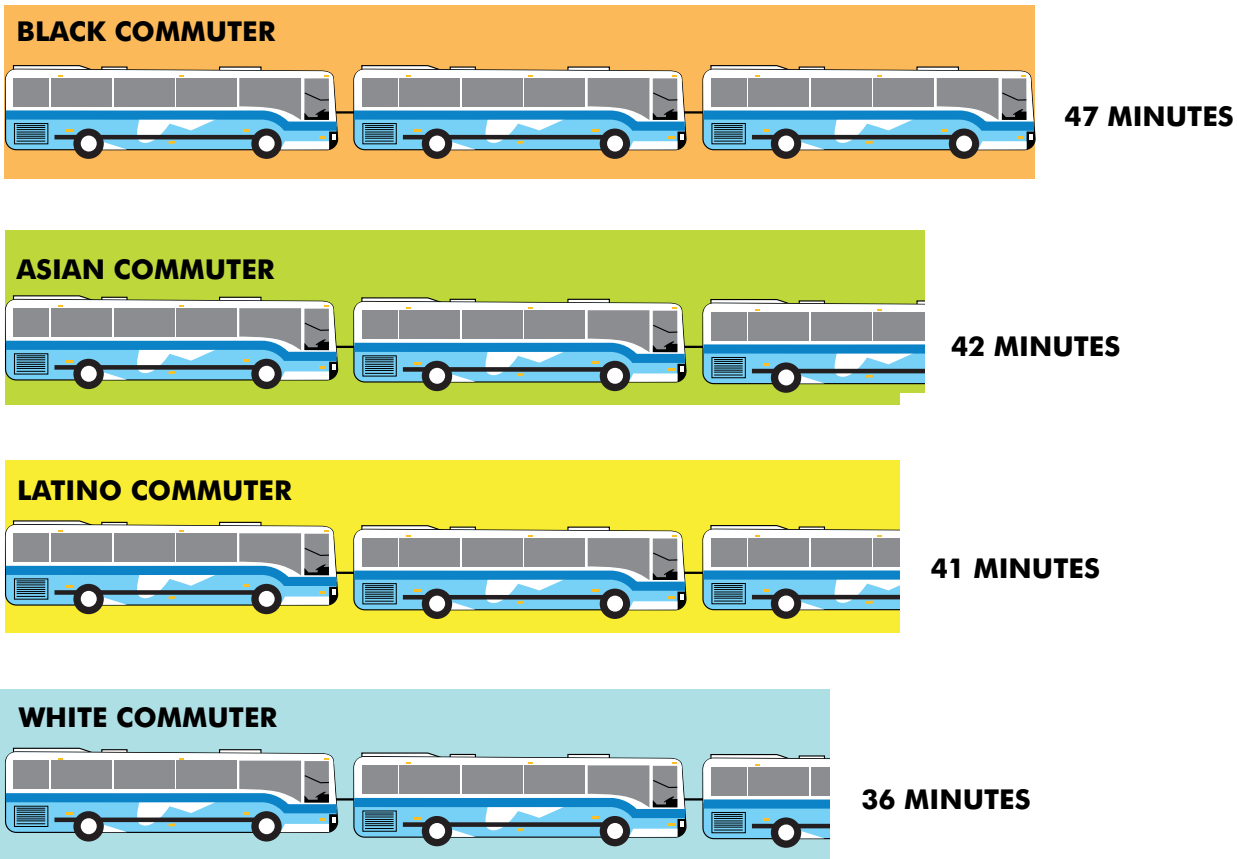
Communities of color suffer most from the damaging effects of greenhouse gas emissions. "In communities of color, especially when you're dealing with environmental justice issues, we're already impacted by far too many burdens," says Terrell. "We're impacted by far too many sources of pollution, and then you have to deal with another burden where you can't even get around. There are a lot of people who don't even have the opportunity to leave their neighborhood other than the public transportation that we have. So it's a very, very serious issue."



Though New York City has one of the most extensive subway systems in the world, many are without access to public transportation. People of color and immigrants, who comprise the majority of the New York City's population, are more likely to be burdened with long commutes that make it difficult to arrive at school and work.<sup>6</sup> Especially for women of color, who are more likely to be poor as a result of racialized gender inequities in wages, the lack of transportation mixed with an increasing lack of access to childcare means raising children can be a prohibitive challenge.<sup>7</sup> Without easy access to trains and forced to take one, two or even three buses to get to work, parents spend hours commuting, and time available to spend with children disappears.

The numbers tell a clear story. The average white commuter travels 36 minutes each way to get to work or school, while Latino commuters average 41 minutes, Black commuters average 47 minutes and Asian commuters averaged 42 minutes. Over 750,000 people in New York City travel over an hour. Almost two-thirds of commuters with trips that take that long earn less than \$35,000 in family income. Only 6 percent of three-quarters of a million commuters who travel an hour or more to work make over \$75,000 a year.

## AVERAGE COMMUTE TIME OF NEW YORK CITY RESIDENTS



Data Source: Pratt Center for Community Development, US Census CTP 2000

These inequities reflect a history of racially inequitable urban planning and gentrification. In New York, communities are still struggling to extricate themselves from the urban development models promulgated by Robert Moses between the 1930s and 1960s. During that period, Moses ran numerous city agencies that were responsible for the building of highways, parks, public housing and other urban infrastructures. His projects have left many communities, especially those in the Bronx and Brooklyn, with limited access to transportation, high levels of pollution from nearby highways, neighborhoods divided by overpasses and deafening noise of passing trucks. In large part because of Moses's projects, between 1935 and 2000, the greater New York City region added 1,600 miles of highways, which served to shuttle white suburbanites and residents of outer New York City boroughs smoothly between the center city where they worked and their homes. Meanwhile, the city removed more subway tracks than it added.<sup>8</sup>

*People of color and immigrants, who comprise the majority of the New York City's population, are more likely to be burdened with long commutes that make it difficult to arrive at school and work.*

More-recent processes of urban development and gentrification have pushed people of color out of transit-rich urban centers and into New York City's periphery where rent is relatively more affordable and public transit is less available.<sup>9</sup> Because New Yorkers of color are much less likely to drive as compared to white residents, the existing highway infrastructures that pass through these neighborhoods do not serve the mobility needs of those who live there.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, though the federal government invests disproportionately in highways, the development of public transportation such as trains and buses actually creates more jobs than car-oriented transportation development.<sup>11</sup> Research shows that every billion dollars of stimulus money spent on mass transit creates about 20,000 jobs months as opposed to about 10,000 job months created through highway infrastructure spending.<sup>12</sup> In the current jobs crisis, investment in jobs is particularly essential, especially for people of color who consistently face higher levels of unemployment. In the final quarter of 2009, unemployment in New York City was at about 16 percent for Blacks and at about 12 percent for Latinos, compared to just over 7 percent for whites.<sup>13</sup>

The New York City transit system, which relies more heavily on rider fares to fund operation than any other transit system in the country, is not structured to serve those who use (and fund) it most.<sup>14</sup> Whereas most high-income managerial jobs in New York City are located in Manhattan, lower-income service jobs are scattered throughout the five boroughs.<sup>15</sup> The city's trains (the only rapid transit system currently operational in the city) do not serve the needs of these low-income workers, because they bring people in and out of Manhattan, not between or within outer boroughs. People of color and immigrants are disproportionately segregated into lower-income job sectors, which have the highest rates of unemployment in the country.<sup>16</sup>

## FIGHTING TRANSIT RACISM

**FOR YMPJ, TRANSPORTATION IS AT THE CORE OF BUILDING AN EQUITABLE CITY.** The South Bronx knows well the consequences of building a city and developing a regional transportation model that does not take communities into account. The neighborhoods there are crossed and constricted by scarring highways that lead out of the city and fill the surrounding area with pollution that cause health problems. South Bronx neighborhoods have some of the highest rates of hospitalization for asthma in the city.<sup>17</sup>

That's why YMPJ joined the Communities United for Transportation Equity (COMMUTE). COMMUTE was convened in 2007 by the Transportation Equity Project of the Pratt Center for Community Development in its fight to ensure that future transit policy developments are implemented in a way that serves those most excluded from the current transit model.

## Pratt Center for Community Development Mission



The Pratt Center for Community Development works for a more just, equitable, and sustainable city for all New Yorkers, by empowering communities to plan for and realize their futures.

As part of Pratt Institute, we leverage professional skills—especially planning, architecture and public policy—to support community-based organizations in their efforts to improve neighborhood quality of life, attack the causes of poverty and inequality, and advance sustainable development.

The Center was founded at the birth of the community development movement, as the first university-based advocacy planning and design center in the U.S. For over 40 years, we have helped community groups to revitalize their neighborhoods, create and preserve affordable housing, build childcare and community centers, and improve their environment. We have trained hundreds of community leaders and organizations to implement effective community development strategies, and supported a wide array of successful public policy and community planning efforts.<sup>18</sup>

COMMUTE's member organizations are about as diverse as the city they are from. COMMUTE groups comprise all five boroughs and are multi-racial and multi-generational. Some had never before engaged in transit equity fights but recognized that access to fast, reliable, public transportation is vitally important to low-income communities and communities of color who are less likely to live near transit lines and have longer commutes each day. They also assert that transit is directly related to the myriad of other issues, including housing environmental justice, job creation and youth development.

Today, YMPJ and a number of other COMMUTE groups are fighting to ensure that existing bus and train lines don't get the axe. "We're organizing around these cuts because it's a visible thing. It's immediate," says Terrell. "And then we'll use this opportunity to build toward something better."

The COMMUTE coalition's goal is the creation of a robust and speedy bus system that fills the gaps in the city's transit map; gaps marked by the lines of race and class. Although each of the organizations in COMMUTE is primarily concerned with transportation needs in their particular neighborhoods, COMMUTE members recognize that the fight for transit equity has to be both regional and collective.

According to Adam Liebowitz of The Point, a COMMUTE member located in the South Bronx neighborhood Hunt's Point, "We're focusing on our own communities first, on cuts here. But we also want to have BRT in Hunt's Point, and to get BRT, we all need to work collectively." COMMUTE relies on this mix of self-interest and collective interest. While individual neighborhoods like Hunt's Point might have particular concerns and transit needs, it's understood that equity will only come with a larger vision.

Together, this multi-racial, multi-borough coalition's demands hold the promise of an equitable regional transit system that is good for people and the planet. It's an essential part of ensuring that New Yorkers of color have access to the jobs and opportunities they need.

### COMMUTE Groups include:

- Catholic Charities of Brooklyn and Queens
- Centro Hispano Cuzcatlán
- El Puente Erasmus Neighborhood Federation
- Fifth Avenue Committee
- Nos Quedamos
- The POINT CDC/ACTION
- Sustainable South Bronx
- United Community Centers
- Washington Heights Club of the Working Families Party
- West Harlem Morningside Heights Sanitation Coalition
- Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice



# BUS RAPID TRANSIT (BRT)

## THE COMMUNITY, ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL INEQUITIES THAT PLAGUE NEW YORK CITY'S REGIONAL PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION MODEL ARE NOT INTRACTABLE.

Indeed, there are a number of important steps that could ameliorate these inequities. One of those is the development of an extensive bus system that fills the gaps in access, speeds up slow trips and gets commuters to jobs. In New York, the COMMUTE coalition is pushing for just that in the form of a BRT system.

BRT is an enhanced bus service that speeds up bus travel, sometimes referred to as “a subway on wheels.” In its purest form, BRT includes the following features to speed up travel time:

- **Dedicated lanes** that only buses can access. These lanes often have physical barriers.
- **Electronic systems** to increase efficiency. These include traffic lights that align with bus traffic so that when buses approach, the light turns green, as well as screens in bus stations that provide riders with updated information about when the next bus will arrive.
- **Station-like bus stops** where commuters pay their fare. Off-board fare payment speeds up the commuting process by limiting lines and wait times at stops.



Internationally, there's been a growing move toward the development of BRT, because it is an efficient, environmentally friendly, nimble and affordable way to build a mass public transit system.

Leading urban development organizations such as the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP) and the United Nations Centre for Regional Development (UNCRD) consider BRT to be one of the most economically and environmentally sustainable pathways to constructing more equitable transit systems.<sup>19</sup> The world's first full-functioning BRT was built in

Curitiba, Brazil, in 1965. Today, 70 percent of Curitiba's commuters use BRT for their daily travels. Bogota's BRT system in Colombia, *El Transmilenio*, began operating in 2001, and currently transports 1.3 million commuters daily at an average speed of 17 mph. (New York City buses run at approximately 8.1 mph.)<sup>20</sup> In the United States, which has been slow to adopt BRT relative to the rest of the world, BRT systems have already been piloted in at least 18 different cities.<sup>21</sup>

Nationally, the BRT discussion has not focused primarily on equity, but rather on the environment and greenhouse gas reductions. According to Dennis Hinebaugh, director of the National Bus Rapid Transit Institute (NBRTI), equity is "not a goal of BRT necessarily. A city would put BRT in high-use areas that would mean low-income people would use it, but it's not purposeful. The idea is in part to get people out of their cars."

In New York City, advocates have been discussing BRT for about a decade. Progressive transportation groups and environmental organizations have long seen BRT as a central component of a sustainable transit model for the city. According to Noah Budnick of Transportation Alternatives, a progressive advocacy group focused on reducing reliance on cars, "We were working on BRT back as early as 2002 because buses were slow and unreliable and because we aim to improve mobility and to get people out of cars." The advocacy paid off and in 2004, New York City Department of Transportation (DOT) and New York City Transit, the city arm of the state-level MTA, embarked on a joint study to determine the feasibility of a BRT system in New York.

According to Joan Byron, director of the Sustainability and Environmental Justice Initiative at the Pratt Center, "The MTA had initially talked about BRT in 2004, but there was no constituency for it. [They] hadn't thought of it on a significant scale, nor was it thought of as an equity issue." The city evaluated the benefits of BRT based on measures like the capacity of particular roads to accommodate dedicated lanes and other BRT features, and levels and frequency of ridership in a particular area. In 2006, the city released a study outlining 15 potential BRT routes and five priority routes. No clear time line was established, but these five routes would become Phase I of New York City's BRT plan.

## FORMING THE COALITION FOR TRANSIT EQUITY

**A YEAR AFTER THE RELEASE OF THE BRT PHASE I PLAN, NEW YORK CITY MAYOR MICHAEL BLOOMBERG RELEASED "PLANYC 2030: A GREENER, GREATER NEW YORK,"** a plan for the long-term environmental sustainability of the city. The plan has been described as Bloomberg's "legacy document," and while it was low on timelines and commitments for completion, the document acted as a menu of sorts from which agencies and advocates could choose. PlanYC made congestion pricing a central part of its transportation vision. The inclusion of BRT in the plan opened the city to a vigorous campaign to implement better buses in the city. As a means of funding this and other transit initiatives, Bloomberg also called for the implementation of congestion pricing, a progressive revenue model for regional transportation that would put the burden of funding transit on drivers rather than on public transit users.

## *Making the city's transportation more equitable, making sure it serves our communities, is part of making a better city.*

In this context, the COMMUTE coalition formed in 2007 as advocates from a variety of issue silos and perspectives were coalescing to support congestion pricing. In the best-case scenario, a congestion-pricing model would have provided the MTA with the necessary revenue to fully fund New York City public transit expansions.

Most of the voices in the congestion-pricing fight were focused on environment and the budget. Racial and economic equity were largely treated as incidental. But the Pratt Center realized that without a constituency demanding equity, any changes in transportation policy would likely do little to address long-standing racial and economic inequities in transportation that make getting to jobs difficult and diminish quality of life for low-income families. Pratt reached out to community-based organizations across the city, many of which it had worked with in decades past.

These groups came together on a shared vision about the centrality of transportation for building a racially equitable city where all New Yorkers have equal opportunity. While each group had particular concerns based on the neighborhoods they are located in, they all recognized that a larger coalition, one that moved beyond the politics of place, was necessary in order to change the transportation system in New York.

The COMMUTE coalition fashioned itself as *the* voice for racial and economic equity in the congestion-pricing fight. While others, including groups such as Transportation Alternatives and the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, focused on the environmental benefits of congestion pricing, it was COMMUTE's view that the revenue generated by congestion pricing should be used in support of public transportation development for those communities with the least access to train and bus service or with the longest commutes.

According to Elena Conte, Pratt's public policy organizer in the congestion-pricing fight, "Some groups cared most about reducing the primacy of cars as users of street space, and there are those who say buses are better because [they cut] reliance on cars. Mainstream environmental groups care mostly about the air, about greenhouse gases. The relationship between those groups and the COMMUTE campaign is that they see equity as a way to bring new people into the discussion. We see equity as an end."

COMMUTE members were not content being instrumentalized in this way—the targets of outreach by groups not primarily concerned with their immanent needs. For COMMUTE, explicitly addressing racial and economic inequity should itself be the goal of public policy.

Many saw congestion pricing as a fix-all for transportation funding in New York, but even with its passage, there would have been no guarantee that equity would be achieved. According to Adam Liebowitz of The Point, "COMMUTE took it a step further and said, we need a prioritization of money, we need funds to go to those who need it most." Joan Byron of the Pratt Center put it clearly, saying, "A rising tide does not necessarily raise all ships. Unless equity is part of the picture, some will be left out." COMMUTE members agreed.

COMMUTE framed the transit fight as an equity issue from the onset. As Terrell argues, "Making the city's transportation more equitable, making sure it serves our communities, is part of making a better city." As it turns out, other groups should have followed their lead.

## EQUITY AS A WINNING FRAME

**IT WOULD SOON BECOME CLEAR TO MANY OF THE KEY ADVOCATES IN THE CONGESTION-PRICING FIGHT THAT COMMUTE'S FOCUS ON EQUITY SHOULD HAVE BEEN THE CENTRAL UNITING PRINCIPAL OF THE CAMPAIGN FROM THE START.** As it would turn out, New York City's congestion-pricing initiative was defeated in the state legislature in significant part because most of the key players failed to adopt equity as the dominant frame.

While many congestion-pricing advocates ignored racial and economic equity or considered it incidental, those fighting congestion pricing actively messaged around equity. They argued that charging drivers would hurt low- and middle income New Yorkers. The argument was disingenuous because in New York, lower-income people rely overwhelmingly on public transportation.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, the argument prevailed and congestion pricing was defeated in the New York State Legislature.

According to Noah Budnick of Transportation Alternatives, "With congestion pricing, we miscalculated, because the economic equity argument won for the opposition. They argued that it is low- and middle-income drivers that would suffer. There were representatives of some of the region's wealthiest areas adopting an argument about equity in order to kill congestion pricing. In retrospect, PlanYC and congestion pricing should have been about equity all along."

COMMUTE consistently believed that equity is not only an intrinsic element to a sustainable regional transportation system, but also that it can be a successful frame—an approach to policy and policy making that can actually win. The failure of congestion pricing in New York set up the MTA for the massive deficit that precipitated the proposed transit cuts such as the one that the Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice members were concerned with. Had issues of fairness and racial and economic disparities in access to transportation been talked about explicitly, the congestion pricing fight may very well have turned out very differently. Framing campaigns and policy as equity issues, it turns out, is good for everyone.

## COMMUTE'S WORK: Equity by Whatever Means Necessary

**FOR COMMUTE, CONGESTION PRICING WAS A MEANS TO AN END—THE CREATION OF A RACIALLY EQUITABLE AND HIGH-QUALITY PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM.** After the defeat of the plan, it became clear to COMMUTE members that, at least for the time being, a different path to equitable transit would have to be forged.

COMMUTE's insistence on equity from the onset of the congestion-pricing fight allowed the coalition to shift fluidly into a fight for an equitable bus system. "We were focused on equity all along," says Byron. "And this allowed us to move forward from congestion pricing and into advocacy for Bus Rapid Transit." With equity as an end in and of itself, the failure of congestion-pricing was not the end of the movement for better transportation.



In March of 2008, Mayor Bloomberg, NYC Transportation Commissioner Janette Sadie-Khan, and MTA Executive Director Lee Sander announced that the city would soon begin construction on the first of the city's BRT routes. In June of that year, the MTA and DOT unveiled the city's first BRT line. Called Select Bus Service (SBS), the bus line now runs along Fordham Road in the Bronx. The DOT and MTA also outlined plans for four other lines to be built across the city, one in each borough. The Bronx line was intended to be a demonstration line, and all players involved, from the MTA and DOT to COMMUTE groups, hoped it would build momentum for future SBS lines. With the momentum already moving toward BRT citywide, Pratt hired an organizer, Elena Conte, to rally COMMUTE members around the coalition's vision.

The Fordham Road line was a step in the right direction, but it failed to go far enough. Without congestion pricing and federal funding for BRT, the plans for future routes were not necessarily secure.

COMMUTE would continue its fight to ensure accountability and equity. Terrell explains: "DOT was planning to identify where the lines will go. What we're trying to do is prioritize—we're focused on racial equity and if there is money behind a more sustainable bus fleet, we want communities of color and underserved communities to get their fair share."

## CRUNCHING THE NUMBERS, MAKING THE ARGUMENT

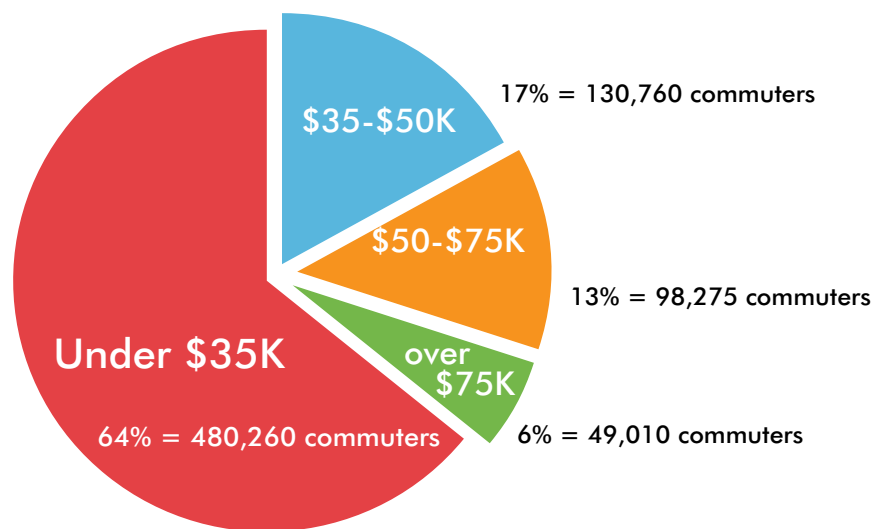
**TO MAKE THE CASE FOR EQUITY AS BRT MOVED FORWARD, COMMUTE NEEDED TO PROVE THAT THE CURRENT PUBLIC TRANSIT SYSTEM WAS INEQUITABLE.** The Pratt Center began crunching the numbers. According to Terrell, "Pratt served a necessary role. Community-based organizations like us don't have the capacity to do the research, so that was important. The research made the argument. We can mobilize people."

What the Pratt Center found was not a surprise, but it allowed the coalition to prove what they already knew: The lower the income of a community and the more people of color who live there, the more likely it will be that residents will spend longer commuting to work and school and then back home again. Although New Yorkers of all incomes and races use public transportation, racial and economic disparities generated by racial and economic segregation means that low-income New Yorkers and those of color do not have equitable access to transportation

Pratt used US Census data from 2000, drawn largely from the Census Transportation Planning Products' "Journey to Work," that details what mode of transportation people use to get to work, as well as their travel time.<sup>23</sup> The latter—how long it takes people from different communities to get to work—was one of the most important indicators of disparity. For example:

- Approximately 758,000 New York City residents travel over an hour to work each way;
- Of these, two-thirds have total household incomes of \$35,000 or less.
- Only 6 percent of three-quarters of a million commuters who travel an hour or more to work make over \$75,000 a year.
- The average Black commuter travels 47 minutes to work, the average Hispanic commuter travels 41 minutes, Asian commuters travel 42 minutes, and white commuters travel 36 minutes.

### **758,270 TOTAL NEW YORK CITY RESIDENTS WITH COMMUTES OVER AN HOUR Breakdown by Annual Income**



Data Source: Pratt Center for Community Development, US Census CTPP 2000

When Pratt mapped the data, it revealed that workers with long commutes live in neighborhoods that are less well served by the subway system and where housing is still *relatively* affordable. It also showed that neighborhoods with the best subway access are generally the most expensive. Pratt also found that jobs in high-wage sectors (including professional, technical and creative) are concentrated in the Manhattan Central Business District (and in other well-served locations), and that the workers who travel to those jobs live in transit-rich neighborhoods. Low-wage manual and service jobs are much more dispersed across the city and the region, in places more poorly served by transit.

The Pratt Center devised a *Transportation Equity Atlas* analyzing city neighborhoods outside of the transit rich Central Business District (CBD) in the lower half of Manhattan. The *Atlas* details nine (9) major job centers where lower income New Yorkers work and where improved public transit access should be targeted. Data for each job center include:

- population
- number of jobs by sector
- average commute times for workers
- current bus and train accessibility.

The mapping of job centers and data on commute times, population and proximity to buses and trains, comprised a key part of COMMUTE's BRT route design. According to Byron, "All of this information is useful to member organizations of COMMUTE, especially in critically examining priorities for new transit investment and developing an analysis of which investments will best serve the goals of providing equitable access to transit in New York City."

For example, JFK Airport, one of the key job centers included in Pratt's *Transportation Equity Atlas*, provides 35,000 jobs to New York City residents.<sup>24</sup> Two of COMMUTE's proposed BRT lines would carry New Yorkers from the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Harlem to these JFK Airport jobs.

The research demonstrated without question that people of color and low-income people are more likely to have longer commutes, live in places with little access to transit, and therefore struggle to make their commutes to work and school. Transit-poor neighborhoods—which are also economically poor neighborhoods and disproportionately neighborhoods of color—are severed from economic opportunity. In the recession, this preexisting inequity and barrier to opportunity is one factor that has pushed communities of color into what many scholars have described as an economic depression. The dearth of transportation options for poor communities of color is partially to blame for this limited access to jobs. It now stands in the way of achieving an inclusive economic recovery for New Yorkers.

## MAKING A DEMAND

**IN 2008, COMMUTE RELEASED THEIR PLAN FOR A CITYWIDE BRT SYSTEM.** The COMMUTE coalition's plan for BRT in New York City, based on Pratt's research on transit need, income and race, presented a full vision for an equitable public transit system in New York.

The proposed BRT system would help New Yorkers of color and low-income residents travel more efficiently to their jobs. The plan mapped 14 routes all over the city. Of the plan, Joan Byron of Pratt writes:

*COMMUTE's vision for a fully-developed BRT network follows existing bus routes in all five boroughs and connects those routes to each other, providing both Manhattan-bound and intra-borough options for commuters now stuck on their local buses. Proposed routes would connect thousands of Queens residents to their workplaces at JFK, and put tens of thousands of public housing residents within a 1/2-mile radius of real rapid transit.*<sup>25</sup>

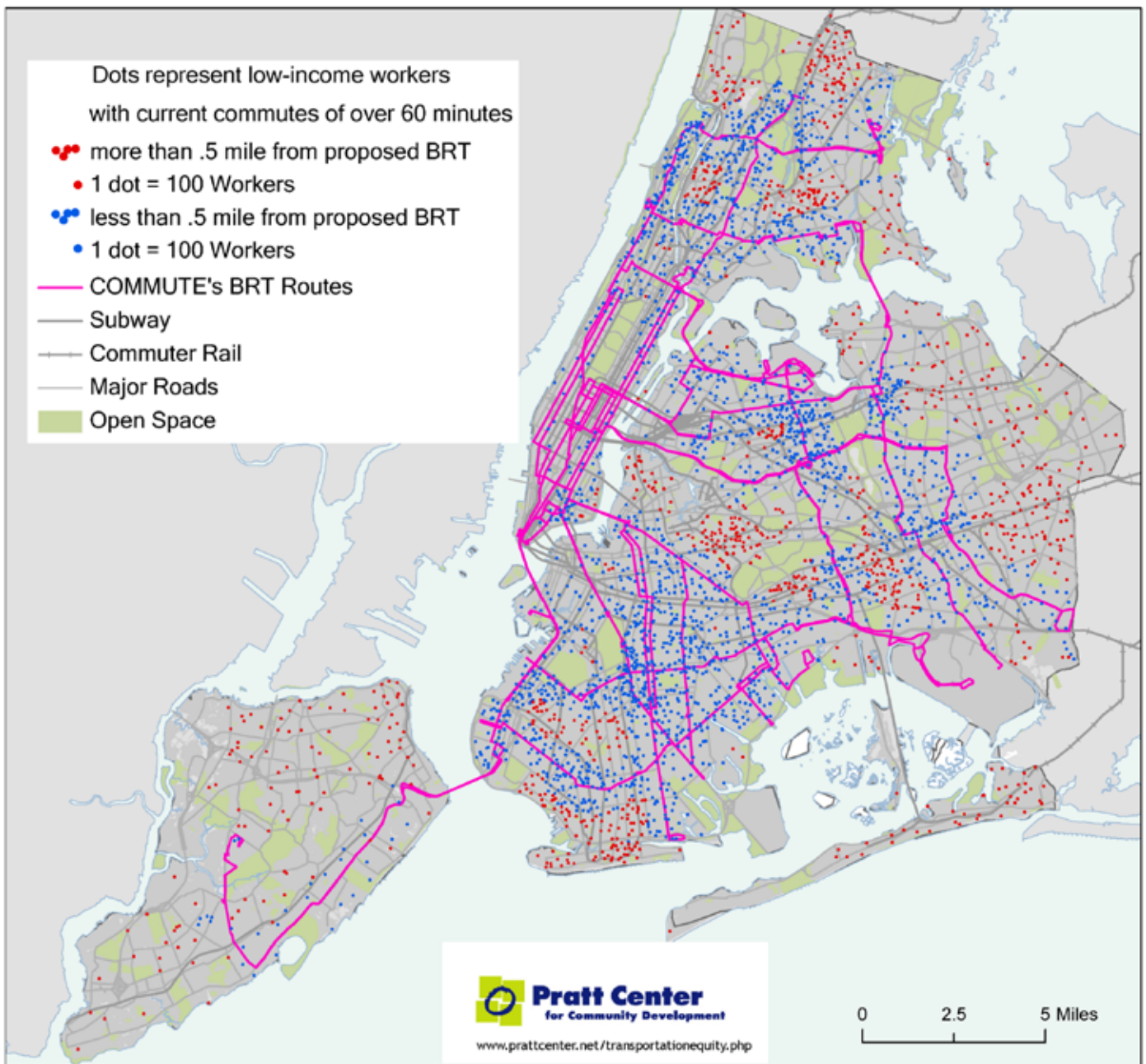
According to Pratt's analysis of their plan, "More than 5.8 million New York City residents, including 2.1 million workers, live within 1/2 mile of the BRT routes that COMMUTE is proposing. These include 235,000 of the 464,000 New Yorkers who now commute over 60 minutes each way to jobs paying less than \$35,000 per year."<sup>26</sup>

# COMMUTE's BRT Network Would Help Thousands Commuting Over an Hour and Earning Less Than \$35,000

This map shows how a citywide BRT network like the one proposed by COMMUTE would benefit New Yorkers. More than 5.8 million New York City residents, including 2.1 million workers, live within 1/2 mile of the BRT routes that COMMUTE is proposing.

These include 235,000 of the 464,000 New Yorkers who now commute over 60 minutes each way to jobs paying less than \$35,000 per year.

All of COMMUTE's proposed routes are combinations of existing MTA/NYCT local, limited or express bus routes.



This map uses sample data from the 2000 U.S. Census Transportation Planning Package.



# HOLDING THE DECISION MAKERS ACCOUNTABLE

## **THOUGH THE CITY HAD RELEASED A PLAN TO BUILD FIVE INITIAL SBS ROUTES—ONE IN EACH BOROUGH—CALLED BUS RAPID TRANSIT PHASE ONE, THE PROPOSAL FELL SHORT OF COMMUTE'S EQUITY DEMANDS.**

The five routes would not come close to achieving transit equity in New York. The city's plan also failed to extend the BRT routes far enough or to have the lines cross inter-borough bridges and connect outer parts of the city with other outer parts of the city where jobs are located. Further, without the guarantee of financing from congestion pricing, the plan did not include dedicated funding. The COMMUTE coalition and other advocates around the city knew that without continued pressure on the MTA and DOT, results were not guaranteed.

The Fordham Road SBS line in the Bronx was a major step in the direction of equitable transit development and according to city data, had been a great success. According to Byron "The Fordham Road line was just about the most equitable thing the city could have done in terms of need," as it filled a transit gap that had long plagued communities along the line. Research released by the MTA and DOT shows that commuters on the line experience a 20-percent reduction in travel time compared to their commutes before they started riding the line. According to the city's research, 98 percent of bus riders surveyed said they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the new SBS service.<sup>27</sup>

But according to COMMUTE members, the process of implementing the first BRT line on Fordham Road had not been a fully open process and many in the communities most affected felt it had been rolled out without their input. After PLANYC was rolled out in 2007, Select Bus Service had been fast-tracked in the Bronx. According to Bronx-based advocates and Pratt, the MTA and DOT moved forward without sufficiently consulting with community stakeholders in the neighborhoods the route would run through. As Byron stated, "The implementation was seen as a very top down process."

While the line was a great success in and of itself, the lack of communication and consultation with affected communities and the subsequent lack of a base to support the program threatened future SBS expansion plans. Without community support, the SBS plan put itself at risk. COMMUTE called on the city to ensure that future BRT developments would progress in a more accountable way.

The MTA and DOT responded by announcing a series of public meetings open to community members, advocates and other key stakeholders to discuss implementation. According to Conte of the Pratt Center, "The city realized they needed input and said that they were going to do things in a consultative way to design BRT moving forward." Though the meetings were not always held in the most convenient places or at the best times, so many could not attend, they served an important purpose, and COMMUTE member groups rallied their members to attend the meetings.

According to Terrell, "We got our people to the planning session, and we made ourselves heard. For our purposes, the session was very productive." In fact, as Terrell pointed out, "Without community pressure from the COMMUTE groups, the meetings would not have happened." Members from YMPJ as well as members from other COMMUTE groups showed up and spoke, making it clear that BRT would only be effective if it was built in those areas most

in need. At the same time, the youth of YMPJ as well as members of many COMMUTE groups educated residents of their own neighborhoods about the benefits of BRT to build a base to advocate for SBS expansion.

In addition to these meetings, the DOT and MTA also began consulting community stakeholders about the four BRT routes included in its BRT Phase I plan. According to Byron, "On Nostrand Avenue, they started that process 18 months before the launch of the route. This was a huge development and arguably a win for COMMUTE. Traditionally the DOT and MTA have not communicated well or served the people on that route in Brooklyn, so this was a major step."

During this same period, COMMUTE continued to demand that the city expand its plan for BRT and implement the most equitable system possible based on the COMMUTE BRT map.

## COMMUTE'S WIN

### **IN THE SPRING OF 2009, THE MTA AND DOT ANNOUNCED ITS PLAN FOR PHASE II OF BRT. THE PLAN LOOKED MUCH LIKE THE COMMUTE PLAN.**

"It was a major victory," said Byron. The city's expanded plan considered income and commute times, distance from the nearest train lines, and even the location of important job centers outside of Manhattan. According to Dominique McAfee, Transportation Planner at the MTA in New York City, "Income is a big part of how we're thinking about this. Basically, we want to create a better-quality commute for people [and] create a world-class bus system."

But even with this announcement, COMMUTE members are fully aware that the pressure must remain. According to COMMUTE members and others, until the lines are built and until there is actually transit equity, the fight will go on. "We'll decide at what point we need to ratchet up the campaign again," said Byron. Ensuring that future BRT lines get funded and built in the most equitable ways will not happen without continued organizing. But, if BRT can move forward, even in this fiscal climate, it's a good sign that as the economy rebounds, it will remain part of the city's plan.



## CONCLUSION

**MOBILITY IS BASIC.** The modes of transportation that carry us from one place to another—from home to work, to school, to see our loved ones and to care for our children—help form our communities and define the parameters of access to the places we live. The quality of this transportation and whether or not it serves our communities determine the balance between living a healthy, sustainable life and being thrust into a constant struggle to get to work or school, to find a job in the first place, and to have enough time to raise children. Equitable and quality public transportation is fundamental to healthy communities and families. It is also at the core of building environmentally sustainable neighborhoods, cities and regions.

COMMUTE's campaign is a model for other cities in its explicit commitment to racial equity and its struggle for a fair transportation policy that addresses the residue of public policy's past failures and proactively moves to build something better for low-income New Yorkers of color. Their vision must be a central part of policymaking as we move to create greener, healthy cities and regions. COMMUTE's story also makes it clear that equity can be a winning proposition. Framing the world as it is, where racial inequities are explicit, can help us formulate policies that make our communities healthier for everyone.

As one of the young people gathered at the YMPJ office explained, "This is about our futures, how to get to school, how our families get to work. We need to fight back and push for what we need." Terrell added, "This is about getting people what they need, making it possible to work, making new jobs and making sure our city's policies are fair and accountable."

COMMUTE's work will go on until all New Yorkers have equal access to the city they call home.



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