

**United States House of Representatives
Select Committee on the Climate Crisis**

**Hearing on June 30, 2021
“Transportation Investments for
Solving the Climate Crisis”**

Questions for the Record

**Beth Osborne
Director
Transportation for America**

The Honorable Kathy Castor

- 1. Ms. Osborne, your testimony noted that Black Americans, Native Americans, and older Americans face disproportionate risk of injury as pedestrians. How has previous transportation policy failed to prioritize the well-being and meaningful engagement of all people, and which communities have been most impacted? How can we ensure that these communities are first in line to see the benefits of our transportation investments?**

Engagement of any member of the community has never been a strong point of transportation agencies. Transportation agencies are run by engineers and often lack the funding for expertise in public engagement. It shouldn't be the job of an engineer to run engagement, but that is what happens. It does not set us up for success.

But the inequities in transportation go far beyond engagement. The top most priority in our nation's transportation policy (and continued in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal) is to move vehicles quickly. Not to move people to their destination. The goal is to ensure that cars are moving fluidly, even if that fluidity on a corridor comes at the expense of a direct route for the driver, drivers trying to cross the corridor, the safety of all people along the corridor or creating a place attractive for local investment. Our desire to move cars quickly often lengthens auto travel. Think of those corridors with no left turn signs all the way down that force drivers to go out of their way to reach your destination. That is done because it makes the speeds better on the corridor and counts as “travel time savings,” even though you might have a travel time penalty due to the route you were forced to take.

High-speed car travel means that drivers have a narrower field of vision to spot conflicts, less time to respond to it when they see a conflict, and more deadly results when they crash. The focus on speed allows for fewer places to cross and less activity at the curb. The problems of this

approach, as explored in *Dangerous by Design*¹, falls heaviest on older adults, people of color, and people walking in low-income communities.

Black pedestrians are struck and killed by drivers at an 82 percent higher rate than White, non-Hispanic Americans. For American Indian and Alaska Native people, that disparity climbs to 221 percent. People age 50 and up, and especially people age 75 and older, are also overrepresented in these deaths. These age groups are more likely to experience challenges seeing, hearing, or moving, and the increasing fatalities indicate that we are not devoting nearly enough attention to the unique needs of older adults when we design our streets.

We don't really measure safety or pedestrians when we design roadways. Engineers start by asking how fast the traffic should go. Then they consider how many cars will be on the road. Then they consider how to make it safe for those inside the vehicles, making space for typical driver mistakes. (The last issue is cost.) Considering people outside their vehicle is not standard. It is considered extra and added cost.

In the federal program, states must set targets for fatalities, including pedestrians. But they can set a target for *more* fatalities. By doing so, as long as they don't exceed that higher target, they can use their safety funds for non-safety purposes. This is how you create a system that is inherently dangerous, especially to those outside a car. Last year without traffic congestion to slow traffic, the fatality rate jumped more than it has in over 90 years. Traffic congestion appears to be our most effective safety intervention. Yet it is the problem we are most eager to get rid of. Our priorities are out of whack.

The best thing we could do to rectify this, and make it easier to travel by the least polluting mode, is to measure what matters: how well the transportation system gets people to jobs and essential services, whether they drive or not. A particular look at lower income people and people of color will truly show us how well we are doing. Such a lens (rather than speed of vehicles) will capture not just how well we are doing in creating equitable access to opportunity but improving safety especially for those outside a car, lowering household transportation cost, providing areas for physical activity, and lowering emissions that impact public health and the environment. We know that poor performance in all of these areas impact underrepresented and vulnerable members of the population first. Measuring the impact of the transportation system on them and designing project to improve it will create economic, public health, climate and equity benefits for everyone.

But we should also demand that safety be the primary measure for roads designed with federal money, not vehicle speed and fluidity. We should update federal standards and guidelines to support this, including the MUTCD and federally supported design standards. That does not mean providing flexibility to build safety. It means making the safe build the standard. Right now we create danger then puzzle at why people don't "choose" to get out of a car.

- 2. Ms. Osborne, recent analysis from BloombergNEF confirms what many other studies have shown: that electric vehicles produce significantly less carbon emissions than conventional fossil-powered vehicles on a lifecycle basis, and that the gap will**

¹ <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/dangerous-by-design/>

only grow as more clean energy is deployed. As you highlighted in your testimony, electric vehicles are only a piece of the puzzle to decarbonizing transportation. How does rethinking our approach to building and maintaining roadways make transportation options like public transit, cycling, and walking safer, less polluting, and more accessible?

It is hard to choose a mode of transportation that doesn't exist or is difficult to access. So a very important step to reducing pollution is providing people with safe and convenient ways to travel less, take shorter trips, share rides or take less polluting alternatives—while still accomplishing everything they need to.

The most important part of making these options available is redesigning roadways to make them functional and safe. We cannot simply layer new options on top of an auto-centric system and expect that a true choice has been created. We lay out how to design a system where people can get around without polluting in our report *Driving Down Emissions*². As we point out, this approach also has a very positive impact on household cost savings, public health, safety and equitable access to opportunity.

- 3. Ms. Osborne, your testimony highlights the importance of investments to cut carbon pollution in the transportation sector. For decades, the U.S. tax code has provided the oil and gas sector billions of dollars in subsidies. For example, oil companies have been able to write off “intangible drilling costs” since before World War I. These subsidies have a high cost for Americans—nearly \$650 billion in 2015, according to a report from the International Monetary Fund. What are some of the benefits Americans will see from Congressional investments to support multiple modes of transport like public transit, cycling, and walking?**

Safety is the top benefit. By requiring road investments in areas with development to be designed for the most vulnerable user first, we will create the multimodal system we want and save lives—both in and out of vehicles. We will also improve public health, provide better access to jobs and essential services, and lower emissions

Additionally, the National Association of Realtors regularly reports on how high the demand is for walkable communities. Many realtors publish the walkscore on their listings for this reason. The fact that there is so little supply to meet demand drives up property values and makes it harder for lower income people (the ones most likely to benefit from high access without driving) to afford to live in these areas and benefit. Funding projects to meet that demand would provide immediate climate, equity, public health and economic development benefits. Failing to ramp up funding for the projects that are in such high demand and low supply will both exacerbate inequities and pass a golden opportunity to reduce GHG emissions by letting people travel the way they are showing in the market they would like to.

The government has kept the market from responding to demand by building a one-sized-fits-all transportation system and through its antiquated values made it hard to travel through less polluting modes. Doing so has driven up prices in the areas people would like to live. If we

² <https://t4america.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Driving-Down-Emissions.pdf>

change course and build more multimodal streets then we will get climate, economic development, public health, and equity benefits.

- 4. Ms. Osborne, recent analysis from the Congressional Budget Office finds that a \$100 annual fee on electric vehicles would cover less than 2% of the shortfall in the Highway Trust Fund, confirming that EVs fees are not a solution to the shortfall. Furthermore, a report from the Institute of Transportation Studies at the University of California finds that an annual electric vehicle fee of \$100 could decrease EV sales by 24%. Given the health, environmental justice, and climate benefits of zero-emission vehicles that you identified in your testimony, do you agree that Congress's near-term focus should be on incentivizing, rather than disincentivizing, EV adoption?**

I don't believe that having EV owners contribute to the transportation system on which they rely is a disincentive. In fact, charging them a small user fee (a fuel fee can work on any kind of fuel) could be used to build out the charging system needed, removing a large barrier to EV ownership and deployment. However, by avoiding this, we have ended up placing the charge on registration or annually in one big lump and using the money for purposes that do not help with EV deployment. That created a disincentive for ownership because an up-front charge is a greater burden than a small user fee paid over time (especially on lower income car owners) and because of the lack of ability to recharge without a garage (also more likely to impact lower income owners).

On top of creating a funding stream to build and maintain EV charging stations (which is made possible for private charging operators in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Package), we can guarantee a robust charging system that supports people who won't have access to charging at home and for those who need to charge up when away from home.

However, in the early days, the cost of EVs will be higher than internal combustion engine cars, and we should help defray the up-front costs for lower and middle-income households. Tax credits are certainly an important part of that. Even better are investments that help Americans avoid the money-losing enterprise of owning and operating a vehicle, which is usually the second largest household transportation cost. That money would be better spent on home ownership, retirement, education, and savings.

On the other hand, the focus on user fees is part of the tradition in the US to pay for transportation with a trust fund. This makes multi-year funding easier because transportation is funded outside of the annual appropriations process. As Congress moves further and further from user fees, it will require transportation to be funded through special funding packages and through regular appropriations. Many countries fund transportation through regular appropriations, so we could certainly head in that direction and stop charging user fees as we electrify.

The Honorable Garret Graves

1. **A point to consider is the weight of the battery for electric vehicles – especially for electric SUVs and trucks, which can be significantly heavier than for similar gasoline-powered vehicles. For example, the Ford F-150 Lightning will weigh about 1,600lbs more than a similar gas-powered F-150 truck. This will lead to a greater impact on our local roads without the owners of these vehicles paying any kind of gas tax for the upkeep. In your testimony, you state that, “we can make a huge dent in our transportation emissions through a marked shift towards zero-emission vehicles (such as electric and hydrogen vehicles) for our national fleet of cars and trucks. That means moving toward zero emission, electric vehicles for our public transit fleets, our freight carriers, and incentivizing the consumer shift towards zero emission vehicles.”**

Since they don’t use gasoline or diesel and therefore are not paying the gas tax, do you believe that such a fleet of electric vehicles should pay some kind of user fee considering they will have a greater impact on the roads and infrastructure in our country? If so, what would be the best mechanism to collect this user fee?

This is a very important point. There is also a huge safety issue related to vehicle weight, especially trucks and SUVs. Trucks have been built heavier and heavier and, now with electrification, they will be heavier still, with huge blind spots. Further SUVs and pick up trucks are being designed with an extra tall grill and hood (for no reason except the superficial), blinding the driver to objects and people in front of them, like in the picture to the right (credit to Tom Flood³). An Indiana local TV investigation⁴, they found that drivers of some kinds of SUVs couldn’t see an entire kindergarten class in front of them. This is one of the causes of increases in fatalities to vulnerable users, as the Detroit Free Press found in 2018⁵. Safety is **far** from our highest priority. Electric or not, it is far past time to address the cost in human life of building heavier and deadlier trucks and SUVs.



In terms of paying for our transportation system, we have a fuel charge now. A fuel fee works on gasoline, diesel and ethanol, and it can work on hydrogen and electricity. In fact, such a fee could be used to build out the charging system people need, removing a large barrier to EV ownership and deployment. However, by avoiding this, we have ended up placing the charge on registration or annually in one big lump and using the money for purposes that do not help with EV deployment. That created a disincentive for ownership because an up-front charge is a greater burden than a small user fee paid over time (especially on lower income car owners) and

³ <https://www.creativebyrovelo.com/>

⁴ <https://www.wthr.com/article/news/investigations/13-investigates/13-investigates-millions-vehicles-have-unexpected-dangerous-front-blind-zone/531-9521c471-3bc1-4b55-b860-3363f0954b3b>

⁵ <https://www.freep.com/story/money/cars/2018/06/28/suvs-killing-americas-pedestrians/646139002/>

because of the lack of ability to recharge without a garage (also more likely to impact lower income owners).

On the other hand, registration and user fees are necessary to sustain the US system of paying for transportation using a trust fund. This makes multi-year funding easier because transportation is funded outside of the annual appropriations process. As Congress moves further and further from user fees, it will require transportation to be funded through special funding packages (like the bipartisan infrastructure package) and through regular appropriations. Many countries fund transportation through regular appropriations, so we could certainly head in that direction and stop charging user fees as we electrify.