

Transit Chat: Multimodal Meet Up Transcript

Welcome everyone. Thank you for sharing your Wednesday after with us. I'm Alex Hudson and I the executive director of Transportation Choices Coalition DCC is a policy and advocacy nonprofit whose mission is to bring more and better transportation options to people across Washington state TCC would like to take a moment and acknowledge that we are gathering here virtually.

Our panelists joining from the unseated lands in the Puget Sound region. We are calling in from the tribal lands of the coast Salish people specifically the Duwamish people indigenous people are still here and many of whom are still fighting for federal recognition mobility for all cannot be achieved without recognizing and honoring those that first navigated these spaces. As we work towards building a more accessible world let us be mindful that we do so on the stolen lands. Today we honor with gratitude The physical spaces which we occupy and the native communities past present future who live and thrive here.

They also need to acknowledge the senseless deaths of George Floyd Beonna Taylor Amanda Aubrey Tony McDade and other black Americans and recognize that the injustice of their lost lives is part of a deep and shameful history of anti-black violence and white supremacy in the United States. Racism police violence and structural inequality are also transportation problems and as transportation advocates planners engineers policy and decision makers we cannot turn a blind eye. This moment requires all of us to take special pause and self reflection and it is past time for each of us to use our power to stamp out racism and injustice and it is past time to take an anti-racist approach to all transportation decision making.

So this is why we are switching our focus for the transit chat today and to discuss how we can transform and reinvention policing enforcement in transportation. We don't have all the answers but this is a critical topic to discuss and we're here to explore it together so please add your questions and thoughts to the. This is gonna be recorded and the video will be sent out and available at our website and captions are available if you select at the bottom of your screen. So today we have to guess joining us Vicky Clarke Vicky is the policy director at Cascade Bicycle Club and Gordon Padelford who is the executive director of Seattle Neighborhood Greenways Want to take a quick moment to acknowledge that this is an all white panel and that we are committed to getting a diversity of voices and perspectives on future panels specifically centering the voices of black indigenous people.

So as I mentioned we had originally planned this panel to focus on the role of walking and biking and rebuilding mobility in a post pandemic world. But it's clear that in this moment of reckoning in our country related to structural systemic and individual racism and police violence it fosters. It's important for us to shift and focus on how mobility advocates we have can and must work at the intersection of these issues. So today our focus is on policing and enforcement as it relates to walking biking and taking transit. I'm moderating this conversation and we'll participate in sharing how these issues show up in transit but know that a deeper dive into how policing specifically shows up in transit is what we're doing about it is working So policing and enforcement how has policing and enforcement played a role in the framework for achieving safety goals for four streets.

And how is it being promoted in the Safer Streets movement. I'll start with you. Gordon Alex and thanks for all your welcoming of framing was really helpful I guess the way I'm thinking about it is sort of two intersecting broken systems right now in the United States you have forty thousand people who die every year while traveling on our streets which is a fundamentally broken system that we can fix

because those people should still be with us and each of those deaths is impacting not only the person obviously but their family their friends their community and in a similar way we have a broken policing system that kills a thousand people every year disproportionately affecting people of color as well and black men in particular and at the intersection of those two systems.

You have a traffic enforcement which has a long history and like you were saying I don't have all of the history but I can say that you know historically there's been a lot of use of traffic enforcement to try and keep people safe on our roads and the problem with that is it tends to not work very well. You if you just take one example of speeding which is really one of the leading factors of collisions and crashes involving you know people walking and biking and trying to catch bus it's really important to work on you can put a cop out on a busy road all day long and then two days later that traffic will be speeding just as fast.

So it tends to not be a very effective solution which is why a few years ago Vision Zero was really developed as an approach here in United States and around the world which is to think about traffic safety how the system not about punishing people but about changing the way we all move so that you know we don't back into each other while we're moving on the street and we don't have to have officers to enforce some of that. So that's been a pretty big shift. That said you know the Vision Zero approach still has incorporated enforcement as one tools.

It's shifted from sort a punitive to the way Seattle has more recently it's been more focused on high visibility going out and saying we're gonna do a bunch of enforcement on Lake City Way and they put up billboards saying we're going to come out and do enforcement because the goal is really not to be punitive but to educate folks about the importance of following those traffic laws that said you know I think we're here today talking about how we can go even further and get some more reforms in Vicky achieve. How is it bicycle. I was muted thanks.

You I think I think Gordon laid out a really good framework there and I think on the on the day today I think we have indeed sort of focused on legislating safe behavior vs. figuring out how to build systems that are safe. You know I think specific to biking there's there's a lot of rules of the road that folks think I think are the key to safety around sidewalk riding wearing a helmet. Not riding more than two abreast the don't really speak to the opportunity to make streets safer in a in an engineering sense which we know has really the better outcomes for people Yeah definitely.

And just policing and enforcement in transit shows up in sort of free three broad ways which is the Enforcement Affairs the enforcement of bus only lanes and occasionally sometimes the unfortunate use of the transit system as a support for the police departments themselves. You know in transporting officers or people who get arrested which we saw some of them in the recent demonstrations across the country and has led to assertive policy changes from transit agencies including right here at King County Metro D.C. is not working with a broad coalition of partners and to advance and implement reforms severe enforcement throughout our transit agencies.

And so long as there are fares to enforce we aim to de force divorce enforcement from policing the court system to provide riders with a range of non-punitive options for citation resolution and to really pivot to emphasizing helping people to resources such as better outreach low and no income programs to allow riders to ride right. So this is seen politically impossible in recent years. We do understand and have heard the BLM movement is asking for public transit to transition to free fares. And with that the

abolition of enforcement are excited to work with us and agencies to see where this momentum can because so kind of going in more and alternatives.

Gordon I heard you start talk about this. Can you talk about the role of engineering and education in reducing traffic related fatalities and injuries Sure. I can I can start Vicky I've got to jump in point. You know the transportation world talked about five years which always feels like it's being reinvented every few years. But you know engineering education encouragement and then enforcement and evaluation. I've also seen and that the equity and some of these other ease and it's sort of this alphabet soup of ease. But you know going back to the Vision Zero approach there's widespread agreement now in the transportation world that the paramount strategy really needs to be engineering if we design a road that feels really comfortable to drive at 50 miles an hour you can do all the encouragement all the education you want all the enforcement you want and people will still be driving at 50 miles an hour and that then sets us up for conflict when it enters into relates to the policing system which we know has really serious and sometimes deadly consequences especially for people of color Yeah I think thinking about that five a six sees that you know I think in the last week or two that safe the National Safe routes partnership articulating the dropping one of the many E's of enforcement.

And I think the League of American Bicyclists really looking again at that bike friendly communities program and and wanting to drop enforcement from that. Clearly the conversation around enforcement is is changing and I think it's happening belatedly but nonetheless it's still happening and I think the question is like is what what are the other options. I think Automated enforcement is is something that Europe has adopted adopted decades ago pretty widespread that has really struggled to take same hold in in the US various because of various privacy concerns. But clearly does not does not have had the same discretionary approach as sort of uniform policing.

Does. And I think absolutely and engineering and really thinking about how do we physically slow down these spaces so that they work intuitively for people as important. You know I think something that's core Vision Zero is acknowledging that humans are fallible. Right. We're not perfect So how do we create our physical spaces so that human error is does not lead to unnecessary death or serious injuries and so really slowing places down. I think I think something that you know advocates across the US I think some have done done better than others. A really belatedly start to think about how do we get beyond just thinking about the pavement.

Right. Street safety isn't just like am I gonna get hit by a car. There are many other factors about whether someone feels safe in a space or not. And so that really has to be the evolution worth thinking. Now Gordon and there's some traffic lights that you think that we could just do away with that we don't need that are unnecessary. That's a great question. I would love to hear from the audience too if they have suggestions for some of those laws that may not be needed. I think the question kind of gets like what's the point of having these traffic laws right.

I mean we everyone's really familiar with how problematic the broken leasing or sorry the broken windows version of policing is. But we also have I think in the traffic space you know broken tail light policing right where maybe we're enforcing some laws that are on the books thought of as like a you know a good thing to follow but aren't what's really keeping people safe while moving around under allowing people to move in these spaces safely. So you know making sure that our traffic laws that are on the books and are being enforced in some way are safe are important.

And we in Seattle at in Vicky can speak more statewide but in Seattle the four leading factors that lead to crashes does tend to be a distraction impairment and speeding and failure to yield to pedestrians. So the thinking about what sort of laws around the books to keep people safe in those situations is really important. But maybe some of these other ones like you know so-called jaywalking or open container laws that are often used to punish homeless folks those are the sort of laws that we should really do a hard rethink about whether we even need them on the books and definitely whether we need the police to be enforcing that Again I would add you know even if even laws that add to it technically not meant to be being enforced I you know I think about the King County helmet law where and Yeah it's on the books but it's not being enforced.

It is like it's being used to I know from from anecdotal experience that people have shared with me that it's being used to harass black brown people and so I think really yeah we need to start looking at it. I don't have a magic list of what all the laws are but I think that I think the answers aren't pretty far from our hands and so this feels like the moment to be really looking at those laws. I think during the last legislative session in Washington by ex worked on legislation to change the law for people on bikes that stop sign.

So if you arrive at a stop sign and there's no cross traffic then you can do the pretty intuitive maneuver of using a viewing stop sign as a yield and not just I think speaks to the fact that you know we do have all these laws on the books that don't necessarily make sense for the context that we have And so really really taking a taking a second look Yeah. Vicky staying with you. How much can be done at the municipal level the city level and how much will need to happen at the county state and federal levels.

I mean not to not answer but I think it's hard to say without figuring out the laws. I think I think each layer of government has a role right. I think so the the federal I'm gonna figure to the acronym the NTSB and TSB something the National Health Safety Board whatever. Not a good use of the acronym Last year I came out saying helmet laws absolutely are the answer. And and really that kind of perspective speaks to this. I want to say this there's this tension between public health folks and physicians that prioritize these individual health outcomes in these public health outcomes that are related to the potential of physical injury without thinking about the unintended consequences of people you know people of color being harassed by the police routinely and the public health impacts that or the public health impacts of being deterred from using using a bike which has physical benefits and so I think one of your earlier questions was around education and a lot of what I'm thinking about as it comes to education is like how we have advanced this conversation around the tradeoffs that we're making when we perpetuate these laws that have a detrimental impact on a big section of society yeah.

VICKY Just to jump in build off of that you know to be specific on one of them. I think a lot of the viewers are probably aware of Seattle Stay Healthy Streets program where the streets have temporarily been signed to allow local access for people driving but it's really being prioritized for giving extra space for people to recreate walking and biking and running and skating. And you may have seen that the signs that are off the big white signs the first year says street closed which has caused some consternation because it's you know it's really local access only street.

So the question becomes well why don't we just say local access only which might lead to some less frustration. And the answer to sort of mentioning One is that those are the signs we had at the City laying around. But to that the reason they're still up now is that the state law doesn't allow you to walk in an open street. And so that's an example of a law that needs to be changed at the state level otherwise we these streets as technically closed which they aren't closed hence leading to some

confusion around that. So that's an example a You know I think Vicky mentioned that the helmet was a county level law.

Right And then they're also you know Seattle ordinances as well. It could be fixed so if you're if you're a politician out there listening there is a role for you somewhere in this discussion wherever at whatever level of government you're at. You're part of the solution. There's always a role for politicians in solving our problems. Gordon just this do you stew statewide advocacy on all hope now. We did so yeah. Seattle Neighborhood Greenways we organize and mobilize people to make every neighborhood in Seattle a great place to walk bike and live. So to partner with you and Vicky if we come up with some of these statewide ideas but looking at both of you for taking the lead on that us This is given me an opportunity to really burn a lot like policing and transportation.

This conversation has and build off of my knowledge. So I want bring into our conversation the work of Professor Sara sail. She is an author and a historian whose book policing the open road lifts up the fact that driving is far and away the most policed behavior in America policing fundamentally changed and expanded with the advent and adoption of personal vehicles and police have been granted leniency and discretion to enforce laws traffic laws which has perpetuated inequalities and fosters huge disparities between how white people experience traffic stops and how black people do. Black Americans are targeted for more pull over stops the phenomenon widely known as driving while black.

And these pull overs are more likely to result in a ticket and to create an escalation moment that too often leads to police violence. She goes on to talk and argue that camera enforcement of traffic laws is anti racist because it reduces biased outcomes and white privilege. In addition to being nonviolent so we know Jesus he knows from our work in advancing the block the block block the box camera enforcement last year which allowed for automatic camera enforcement of crosswalks and bus lanes in downtown Seattle that many people have concerns about privacy in camera enforcement.

And that the algorithms themselves are not race neutral. So can you talk about your thoughts on camera based enforcement as it relates to Vision Zero in mobility Gordon. Start with you. Yeah thanks Alex. A lot of food for thought this in your kickoff comment there around privacy and trying to reduce bias First of all gratitude to you and Disability Rights Washington for getting block the box legislation through that's going to be really helpful. You know there are certain things going back to our earlier conversation of engineering that physical changes to the street can fix and you know if you're pulling into the middle of an intersection we can't really fix that with street engineering and you know some level of camera enforced and I think is really valuable in helping keep people safe and moving another example and Seattle that people may be familiar with is around school zones.

There are occasionally cameras that are only on when kids are in school in session so they have been on recently well we've all been but except for four Earth lunch pickups and drop offs but those cameras are able to significantly reduce speeding around those schools and the great news from that program as well is that the number of people who do it twice is extremely low. So it's not only about making sure that people aren't speeding chronically in the area. It also is an education tool to say hey you know like there's a school here.

But one thing we've heard about that program and I think this is said at the state level is that those fines can be really high. So another angle I think we need to think through while we talk about Automated enforcement is some sort of tiered system for fines so that we're not placing an undue burden on people who are living paycheck to paycheck. Sweden has a pretty cool system where if you're an

extremely wealthy individual you're gonna pay a heck of a lot more for those traffic fines than if you're living paycheck paycheck. Because the idea isn't to punish people it is to try and make sure that that behavior is endangering other or it doesn't happen again.

So I'd love to see that kind of tiered enforcement and setup here in Seattle and you know it's not without its own pitfalls to do widespread and camera enforcement. But I think like you said there are some issues to work through but it can be really promising to move away from enforcement done by officer who is often armed and may have to escalate things Yeah I guess I would say not a automated camera enforcement specialist. So is hard for me to kind of feel like I can about one way or another for the system but I feel like that really reckoning with the current enforcement system that we have which is police based for the most part and recognizing its imperfections then I think I think it warrants further conversation around how do we I don't know who the right people in the room to to get.

I know the ACLU pretty firmly opposed to Automated enforcement but I think I think figuring out like we need a better system than what we have right now. Right. And so how do we get that. And I think you know I guess I'm not just thinking about getting the ticket but the you know you get the ticket in the mail you have an option to contest that ticket. Right. Like What. What are the racial disparities related to how people sort of relate to getting that ticket and paying and not paying. And contesting et cetera. I think there's a lot a lot in here to understand and again not a the Yeah I will confess that I've it's Sahara ticket like for doing a California stop at a Red at a right hand turn.

And it was of learned my lesson so next steps before we go to Q and A though these issues are historic and our orders have been working to center racial equity in our work it's clear that there is a long way to go before we can achieve equity which policy link defines as a just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate prosper and reach their full potential knowing that white people must commit to explicit and consistent anti-racism but is one thing that you or your organizations are doing further and deepen your work towards advancing racial equity.

I'm happy to go first. I think it's I think it's fair to say the cascade have been I think I'll work around racial equity has been halting and I think that's a good word for this. And I think we need to do a lot more we recognize that this spring we adopted a racial equity plan and have a toolkit that we're gonna be using to evaluate our programs going forward. And I think you know really really I think piece a piece of the plan some long term racial equity outcomes that obviously need to be be the priority of our work moving forward and I think that is the commitment that I want to make here that is work that we're very motivated to do and starting and I think it's too late.

It's a long time it's been a long time coming and that's too bad. I think The other piece that I would say is that there's clearly a lot of momentum around this conversation and clearly our organizations are really work work differently and into on different levels and uncomplimentary issues so I wonder if there's an opportunity for us to all work together on on the things that we're talking about here. You know what we're clearly saying there are there is work to do on multiple different governmental levels. And so I guess I would say at least let's do that together Sounds great.

Not I'll keep my comments super short because Alex yes very like one thing but everything Vicky said resonates with me as well. And you know you can find Seattle Neighborhood Greenways racial equity plan on our website and you can hold us accountable to it where we're trying to work through it and make sure we're centering this and our work. But one specific thing that we are back to undertake is creating a task force on reimagining traffic law enforcement and you know Clarke Alex said at the

beginning we don't have all the answers right now. And we want to work with folks to understand the root causes of some of these issues around traffic enforcement and just like we're we're doing today trying to talk through some of the potential solutions and hopefully contribute in a way that's helpful to the wider Black Lives Matter demand to dismantle white primacy and in particular policing as we know it today so if you want to get involved with that effort we are starting to put together an advisory panel and you email K L at Seattle Greenways dot org.

That's K and L and Seattle Greenways dot org. That's awesome. Removed two questions that we've gotten from our instructors and the first question here and looking over my phone that's Mike as a resident and not here representing an organization What's the best way for a citizen to participate further in these conversations. Gordon You just gave a very specific example Are there others Yeah I guess I would say. Well whenever I talk to my local elected officials they say yes I need to keep hearing from you. And so I think I I think that that is always an important piece of this to hear from elected us to hear from their constituents that this matters to them And I chime in too.

There is still a lot of folks that I talked to who feel that you know police base enforcement can solve the traffic issues that they're experiencing in their neighborhood. And so if you can help educate your neighbors around the fact that you know police are not going to solve speeding in your neighborhood and we need to look at other strategies that's a conversation that we need to have so that we can think about using our public resources energies in a different way. Yeah for sure we've got a really rich set of questions in there. Can I just pick up on them.

Is one since the pandemic. Have you noticed any sort of changes in the public's attitude towards open safe streets and you also discuss how the places Safe Streets tend to go tend to be in single family neighborhoods. Yeah I guess the question maybe specific to Seattle so maybe I'll here and similar efforts have been happening on the east side that Vicky may want to speak to but in Seattle there is a program called Stay Healthy Streets that the D.A. created that was really in response to the pandemic and trying to give people space to safely exercise while not being crowded like we had seen in some of our parks and trails.

And I think there was a real change in thinking about our streets as public space and reimagining how that public space could best serve all of us. And I think you know this additional layer of the police brutality protests have shown really bright spotlight on the fact that even with traffic safety on these streets everyone may not feel welcome to use those streets. So I think this all comes back to the fact that you know these spaces our streets are public assets that we can determine how they should be used as a society and they should reflect our values around equity and safety and health and sustainability.

And that you know we don't have to accept things the way they've been either in terms of traffic safety or in terms of biased enforcement And I think I think that has been a gradual shift that's been happening in the population at large. But we'll see we'll see how this goes. I'm curious what you think about that I delighted in seeing that article in The New York Times a couple of weeks ago about how you can't even buy a bicycle in America right now. The bikes are just sold out. And so how have you seen public attitudes around bicycle shifting yet yeah you're totally right.

I bicycling is having boom right now. I it's been I think more broadly just people really kind of realizing that when there are fewer cars people feel a lot safer out on their bike sitting. Recognizing that people have way fewer options to exercise and go to the gym et cetera is just not on the radar and really

wanting family time. I think people have a lot of people have kind of realized that the bike has had holds a lot meaning and value to people and it's been they really need to see. I think it's gonna be interesting to see that.

I think Gordon said how how how this shapes up over the lot over the next six months is clearly vehicle traffic is ticking back up and you know maybe the sort of busy lives that folks folks led before three months ago will will kind kind of change things. I think it's a really interesting time for biking to be on the up because it's simultaneously city budgets are on the down and so maybe things are in the long term will make people feel comfortable and comfortable biking aren't really going to be possible to realize Yeah absolutely.

It's about coordination between agencies in terms of multimodal transportation what is really being done to coordinate between all the different agencies in their region on this issue. And that makes me think about City Department of Transportation's transit agency's washed P. and Searcy various prison committees. There's a lot of a lot of people thinking about this this issue Gordon out. We start with you on the local and then we'll go to Vicky for a regional and then I could pop and say yeah Yeah that's a really broad question know interdepartmental collaboration is tough. You know because everyone has their own incentive structures and requirements and budgets and levees that they're working from.

So just you know a couple examples historically it's been really hard for parks and SDR the Seattle Department Transportation to work together and that's different from my understanding of King County where the trails and the parks folks are the and Vicky can correct here about why that probably but in Seattle that has meant that you know the Department of transportation can bring it a trail or a pathway up to a park and then there's this sort of negotiation that has to happen about how do you get people to the other side of that park a great example being Jefferson Park up on on Beacon Hill and that was it was a really big effort by two people at both departments to make sure that would work.

And recently the parks and s DOT folks have been collaborating more which is encouraging around that the Alex state healthy street making that that space to safely recreate on some of our really scenic recreational streets. I think it is a great opportunity for parks to view its mission more broadly is not just contained to the land that it owns but also it is embracing that recreation part of its mission to help folks get outside and safely recreated during this time which is why we proposed that one hundred and thirty miles of Stay Healthy Streets really hitting a lot of the major parks and sort of scenic boulevards in the city that may not be critical for walking and biking for transportation as much but are really critical if we're going encourage folks to regulate responsibly and recreate locally which is a big push.

So that's just a microcosm of two agencies working together. But hopefully it's a little bit of lesson this question feels I'm off us. I would I would say an Yeah. We need more coordination. I think I think at this moment I mean there's two things going on right there's like so much uncertainty about how people are going to want to and need to get around that. And there's way less money to make that happen and so yeah what I see is individual agencies making making individual budget decisions but it's hard to make those decisions based on forecasting where people are going to want to go.

Because we have no idea. And it's hard. And I just don't think that this. What are you talking locally regionally or or at the state. There's yeah there's coordination happens but everyone is wants to be the king of their own domain and and be in charge of the decisions that they make at the end of the day. And so I think that's a big barrier to flex that you down. I think it's real big barrier to to truly collaborating for a multimodal system It works for this really uncertain moment. Yeah definitely

extremely uncertain Coordinating. You know there's 31 transit agencies in Washington state which does not also include the tribal transit authorities in that number so there's just some of them are individuals some of them are overlapping each has as you describe.

Governed by the same sort of taxing authority but different needs different priorities. And and different ability and willingness because transit is in large part funded through voter approved measures a different willingness to be politically supported which is where you sometimes see some disparities that don't always match community need from our socioeconomic perspective with a community's willingness to support it which is tough. Each of the DOJ teams has the city and state level has transit divisions and of course it is true that transit agencies operate surveys on cities and state and county roads so there's there's that as well in terms of actual capital project there working toward.

So definitely gets complicated but certainly feel a shared goal and then you know amongst ourselves amongst transit advocates mobility justice advocates we think is a fair amount of collaboration that happens there's TCC is building coalitions around advancing public transit and other multimodal agendas. And I know you are all as well. So it looks like we have come to the end of our time we didn't get to every question from our audience. So apologies to that but we will share our contact information for everyone and not too hard to find if you have more questions I just want to really think all of the participants for sharing their time with us and think Vicky and Gordon for all the work that you do and for having this really important conversation with us to make sure that our future looks a lot better than our present and our past.

So thank you everybody for joining us and keep the faith. Thank you.