

**“Environmental Justice, Transportation and Local Governments”  
Bob Rackleff, Leon County (FL) Commissioner  
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Thank you for the kind introduction and the chance to talk with you about this critical issue.

I am going to talk for the next few minutes about environmental justice and local governments – from the personal perspective of someone who’s been on both sides of environmental controversies as a community organizer and elected official.

Fifteen years ago, I helped lead a grassroots effort to stop the construction of a gasoline tank farm in a rural village selected for the very reasons we’ve been talking about here – the community was small, poor, minority, isolated, friendless and powerless.

On the other side were Texaco, Colonial Pipeline, and a county leadership willing to do anything to please these big corporations.

Well, six years later, we had killed that project – and how we did it is a subject for another day.

But it served to underscore for me the seriousness of environmental injustice – how pervasive it is – how communities need to arm themselves with knowledge and to practice coalition-building to protect their quality of life and economic wellbeing – and how important local governments are or can be in all this.

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Environmental justice and local governments is such a broad subject that I want to focus on a very important, and underappreciated, part of it – transportation. It’s an area of public policy that local governments have a great role to play in – and communities have some unique opportunities to influence.

It’s a focus I share with Professor Robert Bullard – the Atlanta sociologist and director of the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Atlanta Clark University. I first learned about his work when I was fighting big oil and read his landmark book, *Dumping in Dixie*.

Two of his books since then cover the subject of transportation and environmental justice – *Just Transportation: Dismantling Race & Class Barriers to Mobility* (1997) and the newly released *Highway Robbery: Transportation Racism & New Routes to Equity*.

As Bullard wrote in *Highway Robbery*:

*White racism shapes transportation and transportation-related decisions, which have consequently created a national transportation infrastructure that denies many black Americans and other people of color the benefits, freedoms, opportunities, and rewards offered to white Americans.*

*In the end, racist transportation policies can determine where people of color live, work, and play.*

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So why is transportation important – and why should it matter to people who care about environmental justice? Here are seven reasons that transportation and local government matters:

First is the direct impact of what gets built – in urban areas, the freeways that have devastated minority communities, the neighborhood streets widened into high-speed roads and turned into one-way pairs.

Second, the direct impact of what doesn't get built – sidewalks and safe crosswalks, public transit service, or simple things like bus shelters, or other facilities that offer an alternative to driving a car.

Third, the indirect impact on communities, especially growth patterns – how transportation policies encourage sprawl and middle-class flight and urban sprawl that leaves poor and minority people behind in declining urban centers. I've often said that sprawl creates a lot of affordable housing – it's called urban slums.

Fourth, the impact on public health – from air and water pollution to physical inactivity that disproportionately injure poor and minority people.

Fifth, local governments control much of what gets spent for transportation – and it dwarfs all other areas of infrastructure spending, such as on schools or public housing.

Sixth, the impact on people's ability to prosper because their spending on personal vehicles are a huge financial burden, especially for the poor.

And seventh and finally, local government transportation policy is ripe for reform. It offers unique opportunities for citizen involvement and imaginative solutions that can make communities of all size a little less unjust.

In the little time I have, let me concentrate on the last three reasons – government spending on transportation, the impact on personal finances, and the opportunities for reform.

### Government Spending

All government spending on transportation in the latest available year, 2000, was \$167.5 billion – 90 percent spent at the state and local level.

Here in Leon County, in the next five years, we expect to spend \$463 million in capital spending on surface transportation – that doesn't include our city airport – from county, city and state funds. There is simply no other category of infrastructure spending that comes close.

The problem comes from where the money comes from and what it gets spent on.

Nationwide, state and local transportation-related revenues – fuel taxes, tolls, and so forth – fund only two thirds of their transportation budgets. The rest comes from general taxes like sales, income and property taxes – paid by motorists and non-motorists alike. In other words, we unjustly subsidize drivers.

What this money gets spent on is also very important, and that's where the other injustice comes in.

Of all federal transportation spending, about 80 percent gets spent on roads to accommodate motorists – versus 20 percent on transit, most of it concentrated in large cities. At the local level, it's even more pronounced.

For example, in Leon County, 92 percent of our surface transportation spending in the next five years will go for roads – moving cars around, not people.

It means that public transit systems will continue to be starved for money – service will be limited, if not nonexistent – people will be unable to walk safely or conveniently, for lack of sidewalks or safe crossings – in other words, that people will have to increasingly rely on cars to get around.

### Personal Financial Impact

That brings me to the financial impact on poor and minority families.

Nationwide, the average U.S. household spends 19 percent of its budget on transportation. When you think about it, that's an extraordinary amount of spending. It's almost exactly the share we spend on shelter – the cost of owning or renting a home.

Southern households spend 20 percent of their budgets on transportation – a reflection of the higher reliance on personal vehicle transportation. Compare that to 17 percent in the Northeast, where communities are more compact and public transit is better.

But the really dramatic differences are in income levels. According to Professor Bullard, the nation's poorest families spend over 40 percent of their take-home pay on transportation – a burden that bars them from having enough money to own a home or send a child to college or even to house and clothe their families decently.

Money spent on buying a personal vehicle quickly disappears. An average new automobile loses almost 60 percent of its value in three years, and it's virtually worthless in 10 years. Money spent on fuel literally burns up – and we have to import almost two-thirds of the oil we consume as a nation.

Contrast that to spending on owning a home – which tends to at least retain its value, if not gain value. Owning a home is one of the surest ways to build wealth and lift a family into the middle class.

Yet our transportation policies that are increasing our over-reliance on personal vehicle are draining families' ability to invest in home ownership.

Incidentally, this also diminishes a local government's ability to pay for services – first, because the general taxes subsidy for motorists means less available for other services, such as schools and health services – and because less investment in homes means lower overall revenues from property taxes.

So our transportation policies have a severe impact on families, especially minority and poor ones.

### Opportunities for Reform

That brings me to opportunities for transportation reform – and there really are many – if we who care about environmental justice are willing to seize these opportunities.

Begin with the realization that, almost everywhere, the local government's transportation policy consists of four words: more of the same.

It's increasingly clear that something different and better is needed – so the time for reform is very good.

At the federal level, there's an omnibus, six-year transportation authorization bill stuck in limbo because Congress and President Bush couldn't agree on spending levels that ranged from \$259 billion to over \$330 billion. It's likely to not pass this year, and Congress will have to start over.

Depending on who's elected President on Tuesday, it may be hopeful or not – because many of the issues besides spending include federal share of public transit funding and accountability.

Local governments have a role in this because so many lobby Washington directly or through their associations. Our members of Congress listen carefully to local government officials.

However, the local governments' direct role comes from our planning, capital projects, and annual budget decisions – what we spend our transportation dollars on.

So let me suggest how communities get involved in these decisions.

First, inform yourselves about the subjects. Reading Professor Bullard's books is a start. Then go on-line to such sites as:

- The Environmental Justice Resource Center, [www.ejrc.cau.edu](http://www.ejrc.cau.edu)
- The Surface Transportation Policy Project, [www.transact.org](http://www.transact.org)
- The Federal Highway Administration Environmental Justice site, [www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment)
- My County Commissioner site, [www.leoncountyfl.gov/BCC/rackleff/Rackleff.asp](http://www.leoncountyfl.gov/BCC/rackleff/Rackleff.asp)

Second, know what to ask for. Ask for more money for pedestrian and transit programs – for a new, larger slice of the pie for these spending priorities.

Just as important, look at designs of roadways being built. Sidewalks are great, but pedestrians can't make full use of them if they can't get across the road safely, especially at intersections. That affects transit use, as well, because if you can't get to the bus stop safely, you can't take the bus.

Also look at seemingly non-transportation decisions, such as where the new schools or health clinics or elderly housing projects are being built – and how to improve regulations that promote urban infill. Are new facilities being built for easy pedestrian access and on a transit route?

Third, learn where and when the decision points are. Get to know the local government transportation planning staffs to find out where the earliest decisions are made. Getting involved early is crucial – before expensive engineering plans are finished and paid for.

Demand openness and full public participation in transportation decisions. If federal money is involved, environmental justice is a requirement under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and federal DOT regulations.

All large and medium counties have metropolitan planning organizations, or MPOs, that decide long-range transportation plans and major project spending. These MPOs are required to have extensive public involvement.

Small counties don't have the same formal MPOs, but they still must meet environmental justice and public involvement requirements.

Fourth, reach out to other interest groups and form coalitions.

Elderly organizations like AARP are increasingly concerned about transportation reform, for the simple reason that losing one's ability to drive usually immobilizes the elderly. Organizations that help the disabled can be very effective allies.

Smart growth and environmental organizations are increasingly involved in transportation decisions. So are Parent-Teacher Associations, sports bicyclists, and just ordinary people like me, who want more opportunities to walk.

You can help form pedestrian and transit advocacy groups locally, as many have been around the country. I helped organize a group locally called the Better Transportation Coalition, which brings together diverse advocates of reforms.

Fifth, keep in mind that environmental justice is not automatic. You can't depend on local politicians like me to do the right thing – well, maybe me.

It takes your involvement – communicating in language we understand what you want and need – and then demonstrating that you and your coalitions can have a measurable impact on elections. That's the language we understand.

In short, transportation policies are a key determiner of environmental justice in every community. It can have a huge impact – it has a huge potential for reform – and without transportation reform, we will never achieve the progress we're trying to accomplish.

Thank you.

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