

Perspectives on Transportation Equity and Sustainability: Voices from The Inland Empire

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Introduction

Stakeholders are the central part of the analysis of any policy issue, especially when considering the community, its political culture, and its relationship with other political actors. Leaders' and experts' opinions, philosophies, wisdom, and beliefs can significantly influence the region. Further, to create practical solutions to the problems of sustainability and equity in the Inland Empire, it is necessary to understand the needs of different industries and groups. This series of panels and analysis seeks to find it all.

The groups and industries interviewed were private industry, transportation and planning agencies, distribution management, elected officials, public transit experts and leaders, and environmental justice leaders. The organization of the panels included two central questions. The first was the definition of sustainability and equity within their respective industry. The second question focused on their perspective of what is being done in the Inland Empire to reach sustainability and equity goals. The conversations developed according to questions were tailored specifically for each industry of the attendees.

This short paper provides an overview of issues captured from each panel conversation. There were six-panel discussions from the industries listed above, with each conversation lasting from an hour to 90 minutes long. These conversations were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed, and the initial results are provided here.

1. Members of the Distribution Management Association

The distribution management panel included the distribution management association (DMA) president, directors, and executives of different logistics and distribution companies. The main topics of this panel were the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and the placement of distribution centers. All panelists mentioned efficiency and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions as something to strive for.

“We feel that it is important to reduce our carbon footprint as well, to improve fuel efficiency, [thereby] reducing greenhouse gases...” - Director in the Logistics Industry

Current initiatives to reduce the carbon footprint of local industries include using hydrogen forklifts at warehouses, using newer, more fuel-efficient trucks, and recycling. They also mentioned the potential use of natural gas and electric trucks and telecommuting for their offices in the future to reduce emissions further. The panelists acknowledged the importance of sustainability for their consumers and shareholders.

When asked about the extent to which the companies consider the community surrounding potential distribution centers, the panelists acknowledge that the driving forces for the placement are usually cost analysis and access to a labor force, which made the Inland Empire ideal.

“So we do studies on the transportation piece inbound and outbound, we do studies on the cost of the property, the cost of taxes, the cost of really everything involved in the supply chain, this is from a warehouse perspective, and we identify locations that optimize their overall supply chain.”

- Director in the Logistics Industry

“Think about Moreno Valley, you’re thinking about Redlands, there’s more land out here, they have more distribution centers. And I know it’s more maybe lower income, not all the time but sometimes, but you need to be able to have a labor force that’s trained enough to be able to do whatever tasks or process that needs to be done for the.” - President, Distribution Management Association

According to the panelists, the placement of distribution centers is based on costs and labor force, and although this sometimes leads to them being placed in low-income communities, this is not by design. Instead, it can be seen as a symbiotic relationship with business site development.

The topic of automation was also discussed briefly, primarily related to equity with concerns about the existence of jobs in the future. One of the panelists hinted that there will still be jobs, but they will require different skills and education, such as mechanics becoming software/electrical engineers.

2. Politico Panel

The politico panel consisted of local government officials such as a state assembly member, congressman, and senator representing the region. One of the major topics of the panel was the location of warehouses and goods movement in the region. This was mainly to do with their placement in disadvantaged communities and the burdens that these bring, mainly because of truck traffic and air quality, and the quality of the jobs that warehouses provide.

“...we are building warehouses right next to people’s homes. The warehouse is not the problem, the warehouse takes away your view, but the problem is all those diesel trucks going in and out of that warehouse. And that’s a problem, we are building them next to schools, that’s a problem. There is no way that should ever be acceptable.” - California State Representative

“That we are the warehouse capital of the world, that would be fine if we had good paying jobs, a middle class, those good paying jobs with good benefits, people had a future. That would be different, but people are giving up their health. The community’s health, and still they don't have livable wages and the environment is being harmed.” - California State Representative

The panelists were especially concerned that these emissions and burdens disproportionately affect disadvantaged communities. From this perspective, there was a brief discussion over the need to regulate emissions of greenhouse gases, mainly from trucks.

The panelist also discussed the implementation of California legislation that will impact the region. In particular, SB1000 was discussed.

“SB1000, which is now a law, ensures that local cities and counties analyze potential environmental justice impacts [on] local communities. That was one of the first environmental bills that I did because what we see is that we do bad things to poor people and when you look at where we put warehouses, we put them right next to schools, right next to a housing tract. There is really no need to do this, so what this law requires is that every ten years when cities redo their general plan, they have to make sure that they have an environmental justice piece in there as well.” - Member of the California State Senate

The panelists acknowledged that the bill might expand to be implemented quickly and mentioned that it has started to be implemented in some cities.

Other topics discussed more briefly were the need for more economic investment in the region and the need for collaboration between local elected officials, private industry, and transportation experts.

3. Public Transit Panel

The public transit panel included leaders of the public transit agencies both within the Inland Empire and throughout the United States. These leaders of the public transit sector were from agencies and companies that work in the public transit sector. The conversation with these experts centered around the effects of COVID on transit and the role of transit Post-COVID.

The panel centered around COVID more than any other panel. One of the major topics was the loss in ridership and funding since the pandemic started. This has led to cutting routes or the frequency of buses in many cities. The panelists are unsure how long it will take to get back to normal. The panelist mentioned that this change from the usual has led to some reconsideration of transit's role in communities.

"...did we get that person who is the nurse at the hospital? did we get them to work or for that matter, did we get the person who is stacking the shelves at the local grocery store to work?" - Executive Director Public Transit Agency

"...we have got to find a new way of making public transit a federal priority. it's not a nicety, it's a necessity and it's essential and therefore Washington needs to fund it like they do schools, like they do parks, like they do other essential services that our economy relies on." - CEO – Public Transit Agency

The panelist elaborated that this shift has led to less emphasis on ridership as the only metric for success in transit and to consider accessibility, among other metrics. Further, the panelists all emphasized the importance of restoring the image of transit as safe by including cleaning protocols visible to the public, both in public transportation and micro-mobility.

Another potential technology that might help make transit more sustainable or help with ridership was also briefly discussed. For example, electric and compressed natural gas buses and hydrogen were a viable fuel for buses, rail, and shared mobility. Other technologies mentioned were the availability of digital applications such as apps and e-fairing for buses.

4. Transportation and Planning Agency Panel

The Transportation and Planning Agency Panel included professionals from metropolitan planning organizations, the council of governments, and transportation authorities in the region, allowing them to provide insight on sustainability and equity efforts toward transportation systems in the Inland Empire. The main themes that arose from this panel were state and local funding allocation and the implementation of policy and infrastructure.

Regarding equity, the issue of competitive funding at the state level was the most prominent topic. This was a similar theme to the industry leaders. The panelists agreed that competitive grant allocation methods most greatly benefitted wealthier communities, despite their already better infrastructure, to acquire funding since they have the resources to spend money on professional grant writers.

“...more and more funding is distributed based on competitiveness and writing a good grant application which is kind of counterintuitive if you kind of think about it because the disadvantaged communities are the ones that do not have the resources to actually write and hire ... grant writers to write those grants.” - Governance Authority Expert

The argument is for the state to be more formulaic and intentional with its funding. One suggestion was for agencies to allocate funding based on indicators rather than the current competitive process.

However, they also expressed the need for local communities and officials to change their perception of transportation, as local officials often allocated most of the funding to roadways

rather than public transportation or active transportation. This puts those who do not have access to private vehicles at a further disadvantage.

“... in order to receive the benefits, one needs to be able to access and use the system, to begin with.” - Regional Governance Authority Expert

The panelist above argues that funding benefits are not equitable as marginalized individuals cannot access highways or other public infrastructure if they lack a car. However, on the other hand, the burdens are also not spread equitably as a minority, and low-income communities deal with the air and noise pollution from highways to a greater extent than wealthier residents who can purchase homes away from the major thoroughfares.

In infrastructure, the panelists had two general concerns. First, the need to create more of a life-work balance by building housing closer to job centers and bringing jobs to the Inland Empire, rather than expanding roadway capacity for commuters from the Inland Empire to LA or Orange County. Other infrastructure concerns were about the cost of building roadways and maintaining them. However, again, these expenditures only improve the lives of a portion of the population. In addition, the expenditures are not distributed equally across the community.

Additional themes discussed were policy implementation, particularly Senate Bill (SB)- 743, which passed in 2013 but was not implemented until 2020. SB-743 changes the evaluation of transportation impacts from Level of Service (LOS) to Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT). The goal is to have local governments conduct their transportation planning, focusing on reducing VMT, thereby improving greenhouse gas emission levels. The panelists acknowledged that the policy was slow to be implemented but seemed optimistic about the possible results of the change of criteria. They also expressed their hopes for telecommuting that came with the 2020 pandemic to become more commonplace and incentivized for businesses.

Last, the panelists agreed on the need for agencies, governments, and other groups to work together and build collaborations to solve the region's wide range of transportation problems. It was agreed that much could be accomplished by working together instead of each agency going it's way.

5. Industry Leader Panel

One of the first groups gathered were local transportation businesses and the government. The three main themes of this panel were technological advancement and innovation, opportunity in the Inland Empire, and infrastructure. All of the panelists expressed optimism about the economic opportunities available in the Inland Empire. The panel members mentioned the region's strengths in infrastructure and advancements in the logistics industry as potential aspects of advancement. They hope that these community characteristics will translate into more jobs in the region. However, they also cited the lack of educational attainment and inequitable capital investment compared to larger cities as characteristics to work on for further development.

“Twenty-one percent of our 4.6 million residents have a baccalaureate degree. That keeps us from being able to participate in the innovation economy. It holds us back from being able to build a more robust and just economy.” - Leader in Regional Economic Development

“We need the access to the capital centers to fund the great ideas that are coming up here so that when an idea comes out of these research centers, you know, it can be planted and funded here, and developed here and employ people here.” - Regional Entrepreneur

Regarding sustainability, the conversation was centered around technological advancements and innovations that reduce emissions. Additionally, they expressed optimism about the Inland Empire having many opportunities for further development in this field. One participant expressed the vision as such:

“...that you take what is a concentration that you would only really see in five other places in the world, and you work to make that to become a leader in zero-emissions movement of goods.”
- Leader of the Regional Economic Development Organization

This quote highlights both the desire to keep implementing new zero-emissions technology and awareness of the advantage of the Inland Empire as a logistic center, and optimism for future opportunities in the area. This sentiment was echoed by the panelist from a local transportation company, who was for further innovation both in the air and on the ground. However, they noted

that this technological advancement could be slow, particularly with safety needs and high capital costs.

Last, the topic of infrastructure was mentioned, both in the sense of an opportunity to use existing infrastructure and the need for its maintenance to make the Inland Empire desirable for investment.

6. Environmental Justice Panel

The Environmental Justice Panel included professionals from organizations focused on environmental justice, active transportation, and planning. Some of the major talking points for this panel were warehouses, the need for active participation from the community, and the need for long-term planning to remedy some of the inequities. The discussion around warehousing came from the lens of social equity.

“Our region is very moved by the goods movement, and I don't want in 24 years from now to see the IE and the reason that it doesn't have the transportation accessibility for anyone is freight and we have a bunch of empty warehouses and community without jobs.” – Environmental Justice Regional Leader

The panelist was concerned that the region's development is too fixated on the logistics movement and that automation is a genuine concern for the long-term availability of these jobs. A repeating concern that we heard from other panelists was the placement of these warehouses in areas with people of color and the environmental justice issues linked to the health of the residents.

Another subject was the need for a long-term solution to fix existing inequities. The panelists argued that many of the inequities in most cities result from past planning decisions and short-term decision-making, which has harmed less advantaged communities.

“...it's really important to remember that cities have been built and created in inequitable ways for centuries and we aren't going to undo those inequities overnight. It requires deliberate and conscientious action on the behalf of city leaders, and so a lot of the work that we are doing within

communities is not about providing silver bullet solutions to equitable issues within those communities, but about creating sustainable momentum.” - Director of Local Innovation

The panelist argued that this applies to the infrastructure of cities (both in active transportation and sidewalk maintenance), the quick development of further areas (causing sprawl), and the economic development of the region (the type of jobs coming into the region)

The need for local communities to be a part of the decision-making process for planning in cities was a point that came up prominently during the panel.

“...today we do have meaningful outreach and I'm not just speaking about the Coachella Valley, I'm speaking about industry across the country; we do real engagement. It's not just engineers anymore. Almost always if we're using a consultant, that consultant team involves people, engagement professionals that help us and we work with partnerships with other non-profits when doing this. The challenge is making that communication meaningful, not just checking off a box.” - Transportation Program Manager

The panelist explained that there had been a movement to incorporate more meaningful community engagement into the decision-making process in the last decade, instead of previous times where engagement with the community was done just because it was required.

Conclusion

This series of panels and its analysis aims to understand the many different opinions of leaders in transportation in the Inland Empire. It is essential to understand the views of all these different views to have solutions to make the Inland Empire's transportation system more equitable and sustainable.

While the opinions expressed here are not all the views of those in their respective industry, it is a starting place by only speaking in broader terms and starting with the same question. Further research could focus on more pragmatic questions and potential solution making and other methods to further find ways for these different groups to work together.