

# TRANSPORTATION FUTURES

## Public Opinion Research on Equity and Transportation Funding September 22, 2015

Literature Review for the Transportation Futures Task Force

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## Section 1:

# Introduction

The objective of this report is to summarize existing research on the perceptions of certain demographic groups about transportation funding. This report specifically focuses on perceptions of people from rural communities, people with low incomes, communities of color, people with limited-English proficiency, people with disabilities, youth, and seniors. This report refers to these populations collectively as “target populations.”

Public opinion research published between 2005 and spring of 2015 was reviewed. The research includes studies conducted in Washington, Oregon, Georgia, and Minnesota. The research is heavily focused on tolling—both express lane tolling and full facility pricing—but some research includes data on gas tax, pay per mile / road usage charge, and transportation utility fees. Public opinion data reviewed was collected using phone surveys, facilitated discussions, written surveys, behavior studies, and transportation data analyses.

In cases where there is limited research on the perceptions and behaviors of underrepresented groups, we included general public opinion research with some data about the target populations. Research about presumed impacts on those communities was also summarized.

There are several key takeaways from the literature review. First, the target populations’ opinions about transportation funding mechanisms change over time, as they get more exposure to information and education. Second, when target populations feel they are getting a benefit from the revenue—such as more access to transit and mobility—they are more willing to accept it. Similarly, if there are viable and affordable alternatives, they are more willing to accept the transportation funding mechanism. Lastly, given that there is a strong body of knowledge on perceptions of transportation funding, it is proposed that the Transportation Futures roundtable discussions focus less on how people *feel* about existing funding mechanisms or on whether they support new funding types; rather, the roundtable discussions should be used to better understand how target populations may be affected by different funding mechanisms, including the day to day details of implementation.

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## Section 2: Key Findings

### 2.1 Travelers Willing to Pay

Almost all agreed that drivers should pay their fair share for road usage.

Where studies found resistance to certain funding mechanisms, it was not linked to an unwillingness to pay. Resistance to specific transportation taxes and fees was grounded in concerns that populations least able to pay would be burdened more than populations most able to pay. Further resistance arose from lack of understanding the benefit different systems would bring to the target populations.

The research shows that target groups support the gas tax, are willing to pay tolls, and are willing to pay road usage charges if they are simple and designed to address concerns over privacy issues.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.2 Many Mistrust Government

Target populations in the research studies consistently expressed mistrust of government. However, this mistrust of government does not seem to be a barrier to successfully collecting taxes, fees, or tolls from target populations.

Another common theme in the research was that target populations wanted government to be transparent in how tolls and other revenues would be invested. When it is clear how the revenue will be spent, support for any funding mechanism goes up.

The gas tax is an interesting contradiction to this theme. Most individuals do not understand the gas tax. They do not understand how it is collected, how much is collected, nor how it is spent. Yet, they still support it.

Across all studies, target populations expressed a lack of faith that government agencies will reinvest the money they are paying in tolls and taxes to things that benefit them. They expressed that they want less congestion. They want the investment to benefit them, not just their affluent neighbors.

Studies show that target populations support using revenue to expand transit and paratransit service and improve travel connectivity and convenience.

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<sup>1</sup> No data about target populations' support or opposition to transportation utility fees was found.

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## 2.3 People will support a funding mechanism if it is perceived as fair or equitable

Lack of equity and fairness are seen as pervasive by many target populations. Tolling and road usage charges are seen as “unfair taxes” on low-income populations because these groups have less access to alternatives other than using roads.

In research about tolling, target populations expressed concern about the potential for tolling to disproportionately impact populations with low incomes and special needs, youth, and elderly populations.

When given opportunities to make suggestions, individuals in both the target populations and the general public expressed a strong interest in reduced rates, discounts, or rebates for low income people.

## 2.4 Be mindful of unintended outcomes

A concern frequently expressed by target populations is that changes in the system would lead to unintended outcomes that negatively impact them.

In studies focused on tolling, target populations expressed concern about traffic diversion onto local, untolled roads. They further questioned how tolling would limit mobility for low-income, special needs, youth, and elderly populations, “forcing them out of their cars and onto buses.”

There was an overall belief that low-income people would end up taking longer routes or losing mobility to avoid tolls. The Volpe study on traveler behavior after SR 520 tolling was instituted suggests that the belief in loss of mobility may be founded. The study found that lower income participants took fewer trips and were more likely to change routes after tolls were instituted on SR 520 than higher income participants.<sup>2</sup>

Individuals expressed concern that any funding changes tied to use would limit employment options for lower-income residents by making the commute prohibitively expensive.

Target populations who participated in the study asked that government explicitly evaluate whether adverse human health effects of the funding options will disproportionately affect low-income or minority populations, including air quality conditions. Target populations expressed that they perceive a focus on meeting the needs of the average resident at the cost of adequately addressing populations with unique needs that affect mobility, such as disabilities, rural residency, or youth.

When the government conducted such research and shared it with low-income and minority populations, they received more support from those populations.

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<sup>2</sup> Volpe National Transportation Systems Center, Exploring the Equity Impacts of Two Road Pricing Implementations Using a Traveler Behavior Panel Survey: Full Facility Pricing on SR 520 in Seattle and the I-85, April 2014, pp 9-10

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## 2.5 People want viable, affordable alternatives

All populations, including target populations, expressed positive response to any funding option when it included options for travelers.

A consistent refrain in the studies is that public transit needs to improve to be a viable alternative. Low-income populations in Washington report that public transportation is not a viable option to meet their transportation needs. This is true even in communities where low-income households are more likely to use public transportation than their more affluent counterparts.

When given a choice, express toll lanes received more support from target populations than full-facility pricing. Target populations expressed that they would opt out and having the choice was valuable to them.

## 2.6 Research and education help build acceptance

When the study included an opportunity to educate the participants, they were consistently more supportive of any funding option presented to them.

Target populations were less informed than the general population about transportation policy, proposals, and projects. When they knew more about project, including benefits and the funding mechanisms to pay for them, they were more likely to support them.

Media stories did not consistently lead to more support for transportation funding. It is unclear in the studies that considered the effect of media stories if this was because news sources presented the information in ways that affected positive or negative opinions in the public.

The Oregon studies of road usage fees was a notable exception to education increasing support. One Oregon study conducted focus groups of individuals who actively opposed road usage charges. The rural participants in the study did not change their position, even with more education.

## 2.7 Many are unfamiliar with different funding mechanisms

Across the research, lower-income study participants and people who spoke languages other than English at home consistently supported maintaining the gas tax over implementing pay per mile fees or tolls. The research does not say why they hold this position. They also supported flat charges rather than pricing that varies depending on travel times, possibly because lower-income populations are less likely to have flexibility in their work schedule than higher income residents.

Across the research, many study participants—including target populations—were unfamiliar with the gas tax: they did not know it existed, and if they did know it existed, they were unaware of how much they paid in gas taxes or how the revenues were being used. Study participants, including

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target populations were also unconcerned with the decline in revenue as a result of more fuel efficient cars.

### Section 3:

## Summary of key takeaways

1. A large body of existing information about perceptions of transportation funding mechanisms exists. Additional research to supplement this information should focus on how different funding mechanisms may actually impact target populations, specific to the Seattle region.
2. Target populations perceive transportation funding as fair and equitable if government is transparent about how revenue will be used; if revenue will be reinvested in transit, paratransit, mobility, and connectivity; and if target populations have affordable and viable alternatives.
3. Public education can overcome misperceptions and build support for a funding mechanism.

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