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For The Climate And Fairness, Take Buses And Sidewalks Before Electric Cars

June 24, 2021 · 11:06 AM ET

Heard on All Things Considered



DAN CHARLES

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One of the mythic "Guardians of Transportation" (often called the "Guardians of Traffic") stands at the end of Cleveland's Hope Memorial Bridge.

Ryan Kellman/NPR

If you have a car in Cleveland, you can get anywhere in the county in 15 minutes. And that is both the blessing and curse of the area's road network, says Freddy Collier, the city director of planning.

Convenience is one clear blessing. But when a city is built for cars, those who can't afford one or who can't drive get left behind. In Cleveland, almost a quarter of all households don't have access to a vehicle. And the reliance on cars over public transportation means more carbon dioxide pumped into the air, warming the planet.

So Collier wants to create a less car-centered city. "We're looking at transportation as a huge opportunity to really address some equity issues that we've seen here in our city," he says. "But also, on the climate action front, to help get people out of their cars."

Getting people out of cars rarely happens in America, yet planners in most U.S. cities are thinking about how to make it happen. Cars and trucks account for roughly a quarter of all the country's greenhouse emissions, and stopping climate change requires that those emissions sink to almost zero. Electric vehicles are only part of the answer, climate experts say. Focusing on electric vehicles as the primary solution can actually make racial and income disparities worse, and undercuts more broad-based solutions.

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A fairer approach would be expanding and rethinking public transportation, and getting people to use it after building most cities, including Cleveland, around cars.

Still another is building and attracting people to dense neighborhoods where people can walk to more destinations.



Mike Foley is director of Cuyahoga County's Department of Sustainability. "The fact that we've got a president now who believes in climate change and understands its impact and wants to help us out is a game changer," he says.

Ryan Kellman/NPR

It's a huge challenge. Yet Mike Foley, the sustainability director of Cuyahoga County, which includes Cleveland, says it's now time for ambitious plans. That's because the Biden administration is asking Congress for hundreds of billions of dollars for climate-friendly infrastructure, including upgrades to public transit.

"We've fought so hard to do good stuff with limited resources," Foley says. "And now there might be money to actually do stuff. We have to start dreaming a little bit bigger, I think."

Cleveland resident Phyllis Frelix and her neighbor Diane Howard are in their 70s and don't drive anymore. They've been fighting to keep the one bus line that goes right past their public housing development, called Lakeview Terrace. "We need the bus to get

from A to Z," Howard says. "To get to doctor's appointments, go shopping, maybe go to church."

The highways built to make life easy for people with cars have turned into obstacles and hazards for everybody else. An elevated highway cuts between Howard's neighborhood and downtown Cleveland. Farther east, it runs along the shore of Lake Erie, blocking people there from getting close to the water.



Diane Howard lives in Lakeview Terrace and gets around by bus. "We still need to fight for better transportation," she says.

Ryan Kellman/NPR

Gabe Klein, who served on the Biden transition team for the Department of Transportation, says the new administration is looking for ways to reshape urban transportation systems. They include creating a more integrated web of public transit, shared bikes and scooters, and redesigning neighborhoods to encourage walking.

"I think the question really is, is mobility a privilege or a right?" Klein says. "I think we have to get away from this idea that if you live in the right place, you can have great access to transit. Or if you have enough money, you can have access to a car. Having a roof over your head and a way to get to your job should be a right."

Cleveland represents the Rust Belt version of this challenge. It's an old city, once densely populated, where streetcars carried workers to factories. Over the past half-century, though, many residents and employers have scattered to the suburbs. The city's population fell from 900,000 to less than 400,000. In part because of depopulation, Cleveland is financially strapped. About 30% of its inhabitants are in households that earn less than the poverty level.



Phyllis Frelix depends on the bus that stops in front of her building in Cleveland's Lakeview Terrace neighborhood.

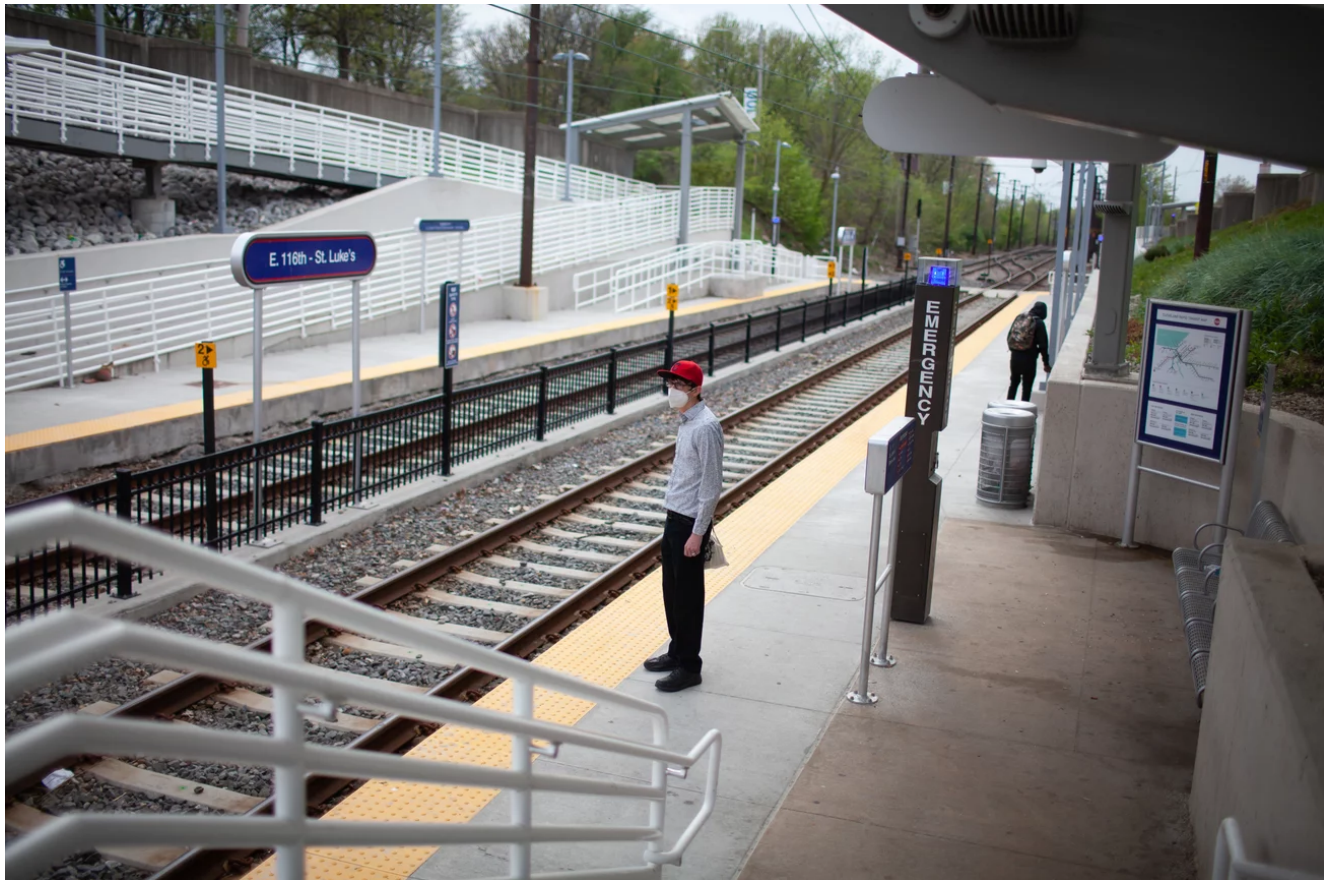
Ryan Kellman/NPR

Cuyahoga County, which includes Cleveland, still has a rail system and a network of bus lines, but fewer than 1 in 10 county residents use them regularly. Justin Bibb, a nonprofit executive who's on the board of the regional transit authority, says that's part of the problem. "For too long in Cleveland, folks who ride transit have been characterized as just the working poor, [or] people of color. We have to change that narrative," he says.

Chris Stocking is doing his best to change it. He's the volunteer chair of Clevelanders for Public Transit, a citizen group that has been pushing — with occasional successes — for better bus and rail service in Cleveland. He also switched jobs and took a pay cut, so that he could get to work by rail and bus. "I took the bus the first time in high school to visit some friends in Little Italy on the East Side of Cleveland, and I was like, 'This is great!' he says. "Mobility is freedom!"

Stocking says Clevelanders have been losing that freedom. The transit authority has reduced the frequency of bus service and skimmed on maintenance, even while raising fares.

He gets equally upset about decades of policies that encouraged people to abandon cities for suburbs that they could only reach by car. "Like with mortgages and redlining back in the 30s, they wouldn't loan to inner-city people. They said — the suburbs, that's where we're going to loan people money, to build housing out there," he says, yelling over the noise of the light-rail car as he commutes home from work. "And the highways followed in the 1950s, where the federal government paid for 90% of the initial highway construction!"



Chris Stocking waits for the train, the first step on the commute home from his job as a nutritionist. "I left a better paying job to work here, because the Rapid [Transit] station was right here," he says.

Ryan Kellman/NPR

Stocking wants federal and local governments to reverse that historical tide. And the city's planning chief, Freddy Collier, agrees — although his ability to do so is limited by funding and the sheer size of the job. "Much of the work that we're doing right now is really correcting legacy issues of the past," he says.

Those issues include the highway that prevents Clevelanders, especially on the east side, from visiting their lakefront. "Reimagining the Shoreway is critical," Collier says of the highway. "It's something that we're going to have to confront, period."

That might involve building more parks along the lake and underpasses that allow pedestrian access. He admits, though, that realizing such a plan will take many years and help from the federal government.

He also wants to provide more transportation options, so that Clevelanders can "get onto a bus, get onto a scooter, get onto a bus. And making those options the default

choice. Because for too long, the car has been the default choice." The city plans to start by upgrading those transportation options on just a few streets.

Perhaps the most important thing, he says, is rebuilding neighborhoods and creating places that are dense and vibrant enough that people can easily walk to grocery stores, pharmacies or even their jobs.



Stocking takes public transit to work, rather than driving, even though it doubles his commute time. "I feel like it's a better way," he says.

Ryan Kellman/NPR

This idea has become increasingly popular among urban planners, especially since the coronavirus pandemic cut transit ridership drastically. One person in Cleveland who's pushing it, Justin Bibb, is now running for mayor. Bibb grew up in Cleveland's Mount Pleasant neighborhood, one of the neighborhoods where vacant lots have replaced family homes.

"I think about whether my grandma could walk 15 minutes to get fresh fruits and vegetables. The answer is no," Bibb says of Mt. Pleasant. "Could she walk 15 minutes

to health care? The answer is no."

If Cleveland can create more neighborhoods where the answer is yes, he says, it solves a lot of problems at once. "This concept of the 15-minute city really should be our North Star," Bibb says. "COVID has presented an opportunity for us to really reimagine the role of the neighborhood-based businesses, to revitalize communities and truly build community wealth."



Much of Cleveland's river and lakefront is cut off from residential neighborhoods by highways or factories. "The river should be accessible to you," says Freddy Collier, the city's director of planning. "It's God's gift to the community."

Ryan Kellman/NPR

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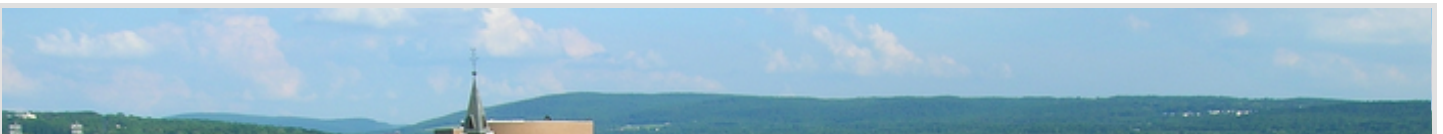
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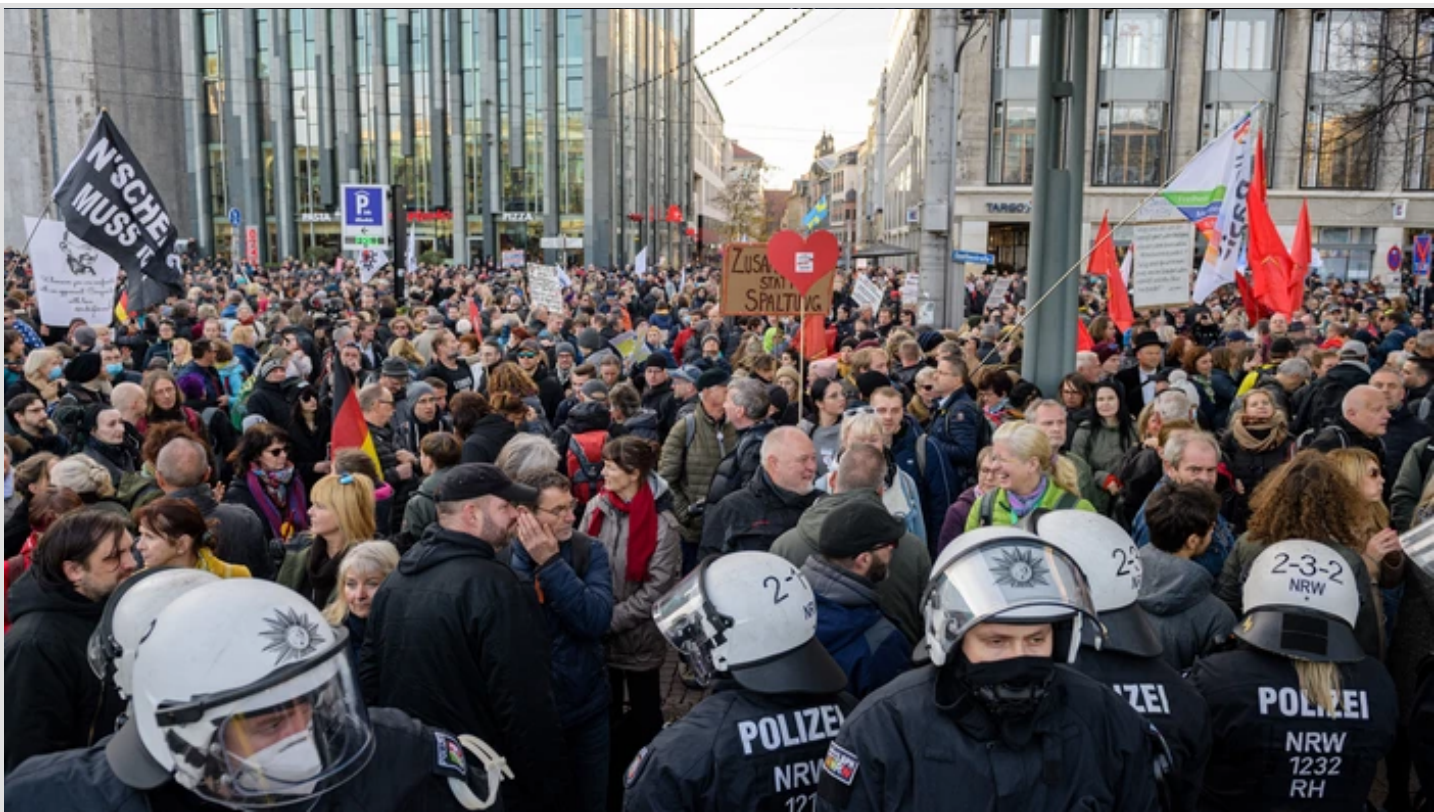
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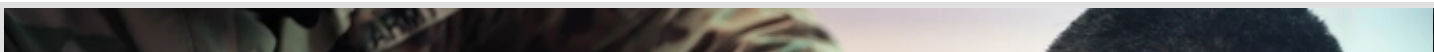
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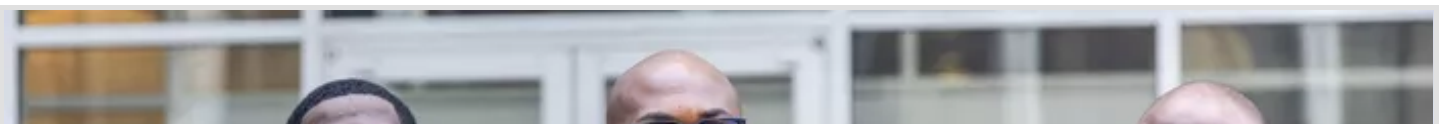
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