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Buttigieg Definition of Equity Draws Line on Infrastructure Push

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- Democratic lawmakers want to give more funding to transit
- Republicans say policy changes could spur ‘other inequities’

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg pledged in his first note to his staff to “break new ground” by “making sure transportation is an engine for equity in this country” — a pledge he’s tirelessly repeated on prime-time television and on social media.

Translating those calls for “equity” into law requires defining the word and its goals, neither of which are bipartisan.

To Buttigieg and advocates who support his messaging, equity is about Black and brown communities that have suffered from moves like building highways through their neighborhoods. Some Republicans describe similar views on racial equity, but believe Buttigieg focuses too much on urban centers with expensive transit programs. Others simply don’t see transportation policy as an appropriate way to achieve social or racial justice.

The partisan conflict could make it difficult to secure the votes in the Senate for policies that align with Buttigieg’s calls for equity, such as altering longstanding funding formulas to give a higher percentage to aid underserved communities with bus services and even bike lanes. That may leave Democrats with two options: Either pursue legislation through budget reconciliation so it can pass the Senate without Republican votes, or delay some major equity goals.

Changing Policy

When Congress first established the Highway Trust Fund to pay for infrastructure, lawmakers decided to allocate about 80% to highways so drivers, who fund the program through gasoline and diesel-fuel taxes, would benefit most. Last year, Congress gave an additional \$13.6 billion in a stopgap spending measure, pushing off longer-term decisions about ensuring the fund’s solvency to this year.

Since the fund is no longer self-sustaining, as motorists drive less and electric vehicles gain more of the market, advocates such as Jacky Grimshaw, vice president of government affairs at the Chicago-based Center for Neighborhood Technology, say the formula should change to give more than 20% to transit.

A cyclist rides with traffic at an intersection in downtown Brooklyn on July 30, 2019 as New York tries to balance an increasing number of bicyclists along its streets and stem a rise in accidents.

That sentiment is increasing across Congress. Rep. Jesús García (D-Ill.), a member of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, said in an interview he has used his committee position to be a bully pulpit to talk about the “broken formula.” García, who introduced a resolution last Congress to change it, said there is opportunity now.

García said the funding split “isn’t so much about rural versus city” because added money for transit would go not just for big-city subway systems, but also for bike lanes, bus routes and regional transit authorities.

Activist Tamika Butler said the country needs to invest more in active transportation, like walking and biking, which can benefit communities that have historically been denied priority. Reports have found that people of color are more likely to be killed in pedestrian accidents because they often live in areas with more highways and less sidewalks and bike lanes.

Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), who recently took over as chairman of the Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee, said there could be bipartisan support for more investment because transit is important to rural America too. Bus systems, he said, help many in those areas get to places like the doctor. Brown said in an interview that to keep this bipartisan, leadership needs to show that “transit is way beyond a big city bus system or rail system in Philly or New York or Cleveland.”

‘Leads to Other Inequities’

Some Republicans, too, have matched their language to Buttigieg’s stated goal: but to say these types of proposals were actually inequitable because they could unfairly harm rural areas.

Sen. Tommy Tuberville (R-Ala.), one of more than a dozen senators to vote against Buttigieg’s confirmation, said he feared Buttigieg would “prioritize urban areas over the very real needs of our rural communities.”

Rep. Sam Graves (R-Mo.), ranking member of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, said “the purpose of the Highway Trust Fund isn’t to enact social change,” but to collect fees from highway users and put that money back into the national highway system.

“I don’t support changing the HTF split of 80% for states’ highway programs and 20% for transit in any way that dilutes its core purpose, subtracts from states’ ability to make critical highway and bridge improvements, or just leads to other inequities, such as creating a larger gap between urban and rural infrastructure,” Graves said.

Biden has held two Oval Office meetings with Buttigieg, Vice President Kamala Harris, and a bipartisan collection of lawmakers to talk about infrastructure. President Donald Trump also made a bipartisan infrastructure package a goal of his administration but lawmakers failed to come to an agreement on it.

Many Republicans have emphasized the need to put more money into fixing roads in their states, and have said they would strongly oppose using the reconciliation process.

Shelley Moore Capito (R-W.Va.), ranking member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, said at the first Senate hearing on this issue that “strong bipartisan support” exists for a surface transportation reauthorization and infrastructure legislation, but it shouldn’t become “a multi-trillion dollar package that is stocked full with other ideologically driven one-size-fits-all policies.”

There is also pushback from those who say cars still support more travel in the U.S. Randal O’Toole, a Cato Institute senior fellow, said changing the funding formula to give more to transit is a “terrible idea,” because automobiles carry more than 85% of all travel in the U.S., and an even higher percentage in urban areas. He said that has only been exacerbated by the pandemic as fewer people are using public transportation.

Not Just a ‘Soundbite’

Although the vast majority of policy changes that advocates and Democratic lawmakers have called for need to go through Congress, Buttigieg can make some changes on his own. Last month, the department listed “racial equity” as a criterion for a key infrastructure grant program. The Obama administration took similar steps, including adding equity as a consideration in discretionary grants and launching a “Ladders of Opportunity” initiative.

“We were very, very clear that we wanted to have specific actions be taken and not just have the issue of equity become a soundbite but to have some real, real actions underneath it,” said Anthony Foxx, Obama’s transportation secretary.

The Obama administration, facing off against Republicans in Congress, failed to satisfy advocates who believed major legislative changes were necessary.

“We worked within the constraints of the authorities we had,” Foxx said. “With the expiration of the FAST Act, there’s an opportunity to open an entirely new conversation about how equity plays a role in our transportation system.”

Ann Shikany, an infrastructure expert at the Natural Resources Defense Council, said Buttigieg could use his national recognition to go around the country and highlight “success stories” where biking, walking, and public transportation are given priority and vehicle trips are decreased, and where Black communities still face negative effects from highways.

“While we’re passing this reauthorization, we need to include policies that address those impacts,” she said. “He’s got this platform, and we hope that he uses it.”