

POLITICO

TRANSPORTATION

How Biden is betting on Buttigieg to drive a new era of racial equity

Barely a month into the job, Buttigieg has touched on improving racial equity in transportation at virtually every television interview.



Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg meets with President Joe Biden and a bipartisan group of House members on infrastructure in the Oval Office on March 4. | Oliver Contreras-Pool/Getty Images

By **SAM MINTZ**

03/08/2021 04:30 AM EST

A central plank in President Joe Biden's agenda of improving racial equity requires dismantling or reimagining parts of America's transportation system, which has long stacked the odds against people who most rely on it to climb up the economic ladder.

Black households are [three times less likely](#) to own a car than white households, meaning they lack access to the infrastructure most heavily prioritized and funded nationwide. People of color also make up a [majority of transit riders](#) and [have longer commutes](#). And America's urban landscape is packed with examples of highways carving up Black communities, cutting off accessibility and spewing disproportionate amounts of pollution.

“This is not just a matter of halfway accidental neglect,” Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said in an interview. “We’re talking about some really intentional decisions that happened, and a lot of them happened with federal dollars.”

Reversing the most harmful of those decades worth of decisions about how America's transportation system is designed falls to Buttigieg, Biden and a team determined to power a multi-trillion dollar infrastructure plan through Congress, transform the policies that underpin America's arteries of commerce and blunt the worst effects of climate change. Those lofty goals require turning buzzwords and pledges into real change that tackles systemic, ingrained ways of doing business.

At the tip of the spear: Buttigieg, who catapulted himself two years ago from a little known mayor of Indiana's fourth-largest city to a top-tier presidential candidate who ultimately endorsed Biden at a critical moment. He was rewarded with the role of running a department with an \$87 billion budget — nearly 250 times the budget of South Bend, Ind., which he ran for eight years — and starring role as an economic pitchman for Biden's next big act.

Barely a month into the job, Buttigieg has touched on improving racial equity in transportation at virtually every television interview, embarked on a listening tour with all manner of minority groups and lists it as one of his highest priorities in the job.

In two interviews with POLITICO since taking over, Buttigieg, who noted that that he took office during Black History Month, explained how he's hoping to take an expansive and broad look at how to improve equity. "It's the right moment to be looking at the equity implications of everything we do in the federal government," he said.

It's an effort that could start with even the most basic administrative tasks, like hiring.

"It's worth noting that just in terms of the workforce of the department and careers in transportation, we've got a lot of work to do to build a more diverse and representative department and workforce," Buttigieg said.

Confronting the past

Addressing the inequities built into the national transportation system would require dismantling or retooling decades worth of physical infrastructure and addressing a more subtle but equally powerful culture that comes from less visible parts of DOT's work, like in setting standards for how roads are designed.

"The big picture challenge is that we're trying to dig ourselves out of a hole that's been dug over decades in terms of decision-making and assets that are out there and have torn up communities that are no longer there or have been bifurcated," said Anthony Foxx, who served as Transportation Secretary under President Obama, in an interview.

This is part of what Biden's ambitious ["Build Back Better" plan](#) calls for, including an express desire to redo streets and main arteries in communities, demolish blighted properties, repair and lay down new sidewalks and redo streetscapes and lighting, among other things.

"Crumbling infrastructure is a barrier to growth and prosperity. If roads are falling apart; if [lights](#) and landscaping of public areas are not tended to; if [sidewalks](#) are dilapidated or [schools are outdated](#); if there are no [parks for kids to play](#) in after school; if there is [no fresh food](#) for miles; if there are [abandoned houses](#) that need to be demolished or empty strip malls and not enough [infrastructure to prevent fires](#); if there is nowhere to go when you are in a [mental health crisis](#) — how can a community thrive?" the plan asks.

Foxx, perhaps more than most, is conscious of the challenges. One of his biggest achievements on the issue was adding "opportunity" as a criteria in existing DOT grants, a practice Buttigieg said he will resume.

"This is something that will get a project a closer look during the competitive phase," Buttigieg said. "If you have an extension of transit into a neighborhood that's not had it, that's a key example."

But a more ambitious yardstick that Foxx and others are setting for Buttigieg, the Biden administration and the Democratic Congress involves creating programs specifically for equity, and not just relying on the existing system of transportation funding which has been largely status quo for decades.

"That's the harder edge case: Can you create a dedicated funding program to tackle this?" said Foxx.

"It would be a bold statement for them to create a pot of money specifically to knit neighborhoods that have been divided back together," said Beth Osborne, the director of Transportation for America and a former Obama DOT official.

Of course, creating funding expressly for equity programs would likely require an act of Congress. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer has proposed a \$10 billion pilot program to help communities pay for tearing down urban highways, which the [Biden administration has acknowledged were often built in a way that damaged Black communities](#). Transportation for America has also [proposed an aggressive program which would establish land trusts](#) to help boost communities in those neighborhoods.

But there is still plenty of work for the administration to do, and the impact of having the White House lend its considerable heft and leadership behind an effort can't be understated. The Covid bill has used a blueprint masterminded by Biden's team, and it's clear that the Biden administration can have significant influence over legislation in the united Democratic government.

The 'soft power' of details

Separate from Congress, DOT has internal authorities that Buttigieg could utilize if he wants to walk the walk, including but also beyond reviving Foxx's addition of equity criteria to funding programs. He also will be the chief driver of not only policy at DOT,

but also in setting priorities that result in often intangible but still important cultural shifts.

An example of the behind-the-scenes decisions that could make an impact is what goes in the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices, 800-plus pages of dry standards issued by the Federal Highway Administration. It's intended to standardize things like road markings to create certainty for travelers no matter where they're driving and includes rules for everything from when traffic crossings should be put into place to how lanes should be divided on roads.

The subjects the manual covers couldn't be more mundane, but critics like Osborne believe they are too vehicle-centric, prioritizing the efficiency of cars passing through neighborhoods and setting rules which limit, for example, when communities can install crosswalks or lights.

“A lot of times it’s in these defaults, it’s in the nudges, the standards,” Buttigieg agreed. “The MUTCD is a good example. Technically it’s not a policy, but it has the force of law, because of the way it harmonizes standards for what all the different departments use. It’s a good example of a place that we need to consider with an equity lens.”

Built out to a nationwide scale, these are the kind of decisions that can have the biggest impacts on people's daily lives and shape neighborhoods to help improve access to schools and jobs. And many transportation experts argue that while the manual gets formally updated occasionally, it and other guidance documents like it within DOT are due for a major overhaul.

Foxx called the lower-profile nudges under DOT’s control “soft power.”

“That could extend to whether or not sound barriers are put up near a freeway. It could involve whether air noise continues to roll over low-income communities. It could be a lot of things. We tried to build the muscle of using both types of authority when they were available to us,” Foxx said.

Building back better

During his tenure, Foxx focused on equity, [speaking about](#) how highways built in Charlotte [cut off the house](#) he grew up in.

“It’s not unprecedented for a secretary to talk about these problems,” Osborne said. “Secretary Foxx did a great job of eloquently explaining what this means at a personal level.” But past administrations have struggled to move beyond being vocal about the issue, she said.

Buttigieg agreed with that assessment. “Secretary Foxx was very outspoken and very intentional about confronting the history of basically racist construction and highways destroying neighborhoods,” he said. “I think now there’s a chance to bring more resources to bear in doing something about that.”

Foxx, who now works at ride-hailing giant Lyft, has challenged the assertion that his greatest achievements were rhetorical. He [pointed to not only DOT's work under his leadership](#) to include equity as a criteria in major grants, but also building out transit infrastructure in cities that needed it and tearing down highways elsewhere. He also worked to redistribute flight noise so that it doesn't disproportionately hurt poor communities.

“I think there’s a tendency to undervalue the contributions of African Americans who have served in these roles. While I’m still able to articulate what I know to be true, I’m going to do that, not only for myself but also for others,” Foxx told POLITICO.

He said when he was in the role, not many people were focused on transportation as a civil rights issue. "Adjusting for what kind of environment I was in, I think we did about as much as anyone could have," he said.

But the environment has changed in the last few years, Foxx said, citing the conversations around racial injustice spurred in part by the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery.

“I think there’s a readiness for this conversation that may not have been there 10 years ago,” he said. “I hope that some of the pieces we put in place can be picked up and deepened and taken beyond where we were able to take them at the time. I think there’s likely an appetite today for expanding authorities and giving the department more muscle to do more things.”

Buttigieg, for his part, says he’s also not just talking.

He said he’s still learning about the uneven damage that transportation policy has done historically and has been reading about Robert Moses, the mid-20th century builder whose highway designs frequently led to the decimation of Black neighborhoods and who intentionally built bridges too low for buses to pass through, blocking poorer Black and Puerto Rican New Yorkers from accessing beaches and other spaces.

“I think there's got to be a lot of listening,” he said. “Not because I'm new to these issues, but because we need to understand the full scope of how we got here, and because everyone needs to be at the table in dealing with the solutions.”