

# POLICY BRIEF: EAST COACHELLA VALLEY PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

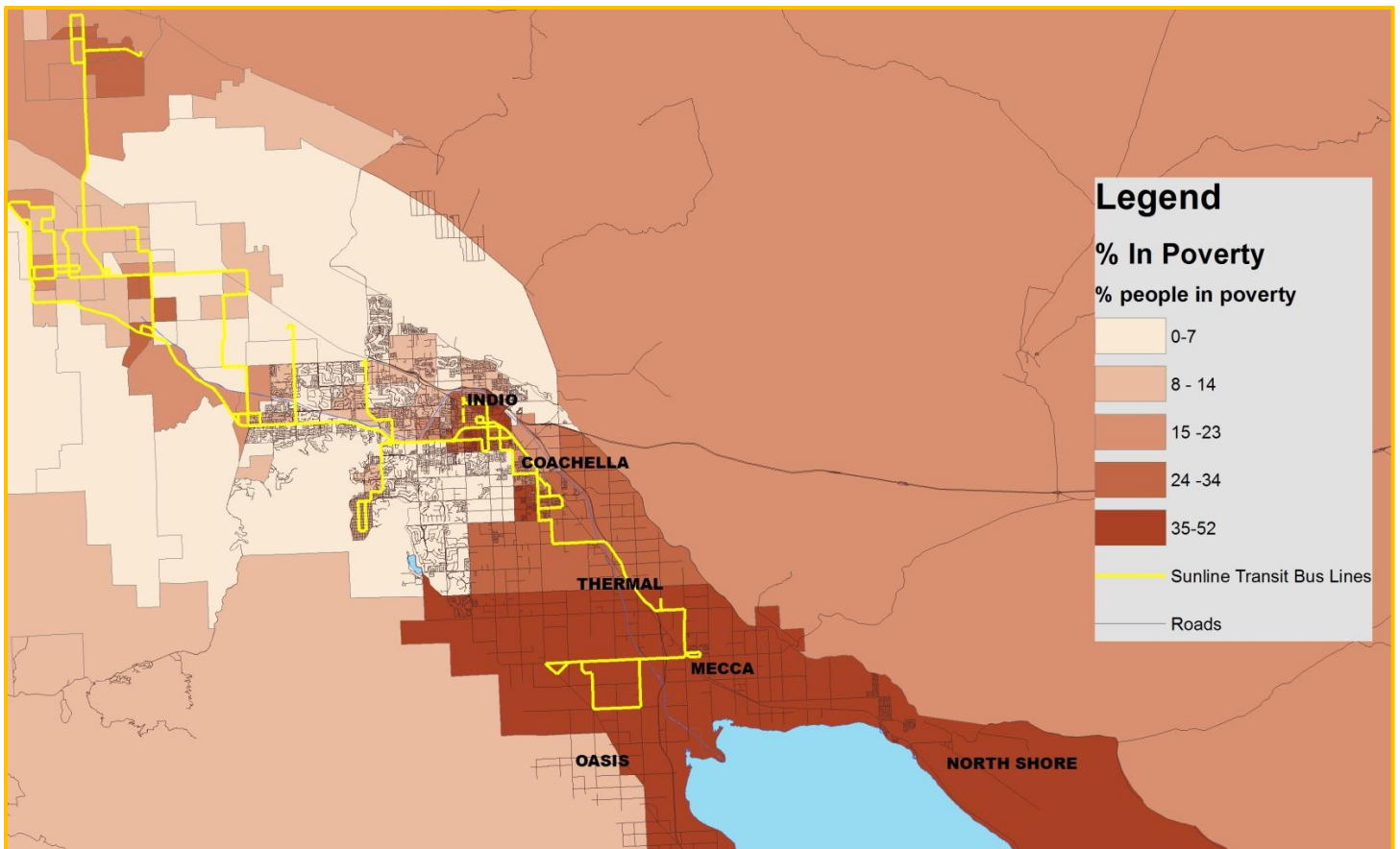
## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“TRANSPORTATION DECISION MAKING—WHETHER AT THE FEDERAL, REGION, STATE OR LOCAL LEVEL— OFTEN MIRRORS THE POWER ARRANGEMENTS OF THE DOMINANT SOCIETY AND ITS INSTITUTIONS.”<sup>1</sup>

Transportation planning is an environmental justice issue. In order to improve equity of communities and their residents, regions must implement effective transportation policies. Good planning and successful transportation projects connect entire communities to employment, resources, and basic goods. To build healthy communities, transportation solutions that are inclusive need to be implemented. Evenhanded transportation choices benefit individuals, families, communities, the environment and the economy.

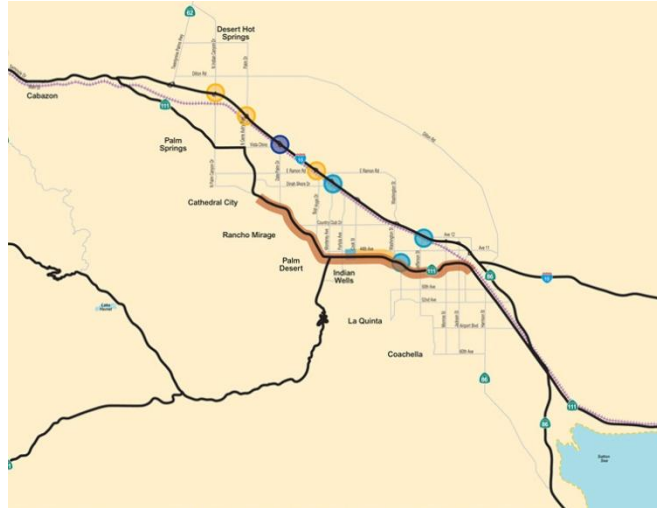
## STATEMENT OF THE ISSUE

Federal, State, Regional and Local agencies have a role to play in creating environmental justice in the East Coachella Valley. Residents living in poverty have less access to public transportation. This in turn limits their access to all services, employment and food. Specifically affected by inequity in public transport are the communities of Thermal, Mecca, Oasis and, most noticeably, North Shore. In addition, there are very few sidewalks and bike lanes within these communities since the roads tend to be designed for truck and agricultural traffic. As the attached maps illustrate, both public bus routes and roads are very limited in these communities. Additionally, the maps show shading by percent of people in poverty and percent of people of color as labeled. It is clear that residents in areas with higher poverty levels who are people of color are not receiving the same level of bus service as the more affluent areas of the West Coachella Valley.



## PRE-EXISTING POLICIES

- A statewide transportation incentive program was developed to encourage employees to use alternate means of transportation when commuting to and from work. This program promotes air quality, reduces traffic congestion, and conserves energy by reducing the number of single occupancy vehicles on the road. Employees using an authorized transportation method, which includes public transportation and vanpools, may receive a subsidy to apply toward their monthly transportation cost. Transportation subsidies are currently not taxable to the employee.
- The Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) worked with the Riverside County Transportation Commission (RCTC), elected officials and local jurisdictions in Riverside County to develop the 2012–2035 Regional Transportation Plan and Sustainable Communities Strategy (RTP/SCS). This is a long-range plan to improve overall mobility, reduce greenhouse gases and enhance the quality of life for county residents.
  - Approved by state and federal agencies in June 2012, the plan includes \$27.1 billion in transportation projects for Riverside County.
  - Of proposed transportation funding in Coachella Valley:
    - 41% will go to highways
    - 27% to local streets and roads
    - 32% to transit
  - Below is a map from RCTC showing the major transportation projects in the Coachella Valley sub region from a total of 1,114 Riverside County-specific projects contained in the 2012-2035 RTP/SCS. All of the improvements shown are located in the West Coachella Valley where residents are wealthier.



## POLICY OPTIONS

To achieve environmental justice, policy makers should serve the least advantaged first. Bus supply and demand needs to be re-examined in the Coachella Valley and bus routes and schedules restructured to include access for those communities that are underserved and have few transportation options. Rather than creating more links to communities outside the Coachella Valley for residents who commute for work in other regions, access within the region needs to be improved for those residents who are the backbone of the agricultural industry in the East Coachella Valley.

Public transit services should be more equitable. Therefore, increased and dedicated funding for public transportation needs to be considered in order to improve service for underserved residents of East Coachella Valley. One way to do this would be to allow some of the funds currently set aside for roads and parking in more affluent communities to be used for public transport in communities with poverty. Adding a new bus route to the community of North Shore would cost an estimated \$350,000 for two years of service.

Transportation and land use planning should be integrated with environmental justice goals. Policies to encourage the development of public transportation in concert with job location, medical services, grocery stores and affordable housing should be developed.

In addition, access to transit stops and stations for pedestrians and bikes should be considered along with resources for ride sharing, since this is a common practice among ECV residents. Bike racks on buses, bike parking at bus stops and stations would also be helpful for residents who do not have cars but do have bikes.

To make transportation within small rural communities safer and healthier, roads within communities need to be paved with bike lanes and sidewalks. Residents should be made aware of state programs for increasing ride sharing by offering incentives.

Funds are already dedicated to transportation projects in the Coachella Valley. However, there is little evidence to suggest that environmental justice was a consideration in the development of regional transportation plans. Since funding for transportation is already set aside, it may be possible to redirect it to fulfill justice goals.

---

## POLICY DISCUSSION

---

---

### POLICY BENEFITS

---

Funds are already dedicated to transportation projects in the Coachella Valley. Local residents needing public transportation need to ask for redirection of funds to allow for an appropriate rural transportation system. Public bus lines already exist in the East Coachella Valley and when compared to other transportation projects, extending access to public buses by creating new bus routes is relatively inexpensive.

Creating bus routes for community members without transportation options will increase access for those members of the community who are least engaged and who have least access to goods and services. It will allow for better conditions for farm workers who live in remote regions and need inexpensive transport to work.

Designing bus routes with the needs of residents in mind will encourage the use of local services.

Improving streets in rural communities to include sidewalks and bike lanes as well as paving local roads will increase the health of local residents by encouraging more activity within the community while improving overall access.

---

### OBSTACLES TO PROPOSED POLICIES

---

Policies have already been discussed and approved for the Coachella Valley region of Riverside County and plans set in motion for these policies and project plans. Changing direction in the midst of an approved plan can be time consuming and problematic. Although relatively inexpensive, these changes will still require dedicated funding and community input. Engaging communities who are historically underserved is challenging for agencies located far from these communities. Community engagement in these regions is not conducted in Spanish.

---

## REFERENCES

---

<sup>i</sup> Bullard, Robert D. 1997 Epilogue. In: *Just Transportation: Dismantling Race & Class Barriers to Mobility*. Bullard, Robert D. and Glenn S. Johnson, eds. Page 173. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.



CALIFORNIA  
INSTITUTE FOR  
RURAL STUDIES

with technical assistance from the UC Davis Center for Regional Change and financial support from The California Endowment.