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Public Transit Funding and Community Infrastructure Needs

Speaker Biographies

Lauren Cencic serves as the CEO of Metro Transit, the Regional Metropolitan Transit Authority of Omaha. Cencic has a unique insight into public transportation and its growing future in Omaha. She laid the groundwork for Omaha's first bus rapid transit line (ORBT) as Metro's Special Projects Manager before heading to the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority as a Senior Director. She worked on major infrastructure projects, led design and planning efforts, coordinated short- and long-term strategy development, and facilitated community and stakeholder engagement. Cencic returned to Omaha in 2020, where she guides Metro Transit's role as the planner, builder, and operator of public transit in the Greater Omaha area. She knows removing barriers to transportation plays a large role in the community's overall health and happiness. As CEO, she has overseen the agency's first strategic plan, the launch of the first bus rapid transit line, fare capping, the K-12 Rides Free program, a microtransit project, and major renovations and investments in transit centers and Metro Transit's administrative/maintenance facility. Beyond that, she knows public transit can't meet its goals alone, she works to coordinate local city, government, and community leaders in the goal of developing and building supportive infrastructure so Metro Transit can connect people to opportunities.

Amanda Hermans is a research associate in the Housing and Communities Division. Her research interests include community development, housing affordability, public transit access, and economic equity. She previously worked as a research assistant with The Lab @ DC, a scientific research team in the District of Columbia Mayor's administration, where she used evidence-based research and civic design practices to evaluate and improve the District's housing and transit programs. Hermans has a bachelor's degree in journalism and international studies from Northwestern University and a master of public policy degree from American University, where she focused on urban and environmental policy analysis.

Yonah Freemark is a principal research associate in the Housing and Communities Division at the Urban Institute. He is the research director of the Land Use Lab at Urban and leads Urban's work on infrastructure equity. His research focuses on the intersection of land use, affordable housing, transportation, and governance. He has published peer-reviewed scholarship in numerous journals, including *Urban Affairs Review*, *Politics & Society*, *Housing Policy Debate*, and the *Journal of the American Planning Association*. Previously, Freemark worked for Chicago's Metropolitan Planning Council and has written for the *New York Times*, *Next City*, and *CityLab*, among other publications. He holds master's degrees in city planning and in transportation, as well as a PhD in urban studies from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He lives along the U Street Corridor in Washington, DC.

Carter McCoy is a Government Affairs Director with Cardinal Infrastructure, LLC, a boutique federal advocacy firm with a unique focus on public transportation. At Cardinal, Carter represents transit agencies, manufacturers, and local governments in front of Congress and the Administration to advance pro-transit policies that contribute to more livable communities. Prior to Cardinal, he worked at the Minnesota State Legislature and for Carlson Wagonlit Travel (now CWT). A native of Saint Paul and graduate from the University of Minnesota, DC has been home since 2021. In his spare time he can be found playing basketball at Stead Park, golfing at Hains Point, or biking around the DMV.

Beth Osborne is the President and CEO of Smart Growth America. Before being appointed to this role, she led Smart Growth America's transportation program, including as Director of Transportation for America. Beth previously served at the U.S. Department of Transportation as Acting Assistant Secretary and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Transportation Policy, beginning in 2009. Earlier in her career, Beth worked for Sen. Tom Carper (DE) as an advisor on transportation, trade, and labor policy, served as policy director for Smart Growth America, and was legislative director for environmental policy at the Southern Governors' Association. She began her career in the House of Representatives as a legislative assistant for Rep. Ron Klink (PA) and legislative director for Rep. Brian Baird (WA-03).

Charlotte Shaw is Executive Director and CEO of Birmingham-Jefferson County Transit Authority (BJCTA), leading the county's public transit agency through modernization and strategic growth. A public-sector leader with experience in capital programs, procurement, and project management, Shaw previously served with the City of Birmingham and the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority. At BJCTA, she is advancing fixed-route service, Bus Rapid Transit, microtransit, digital rider tools, and long-term infrastructure investment. Shaw serves as Second Vice President of the Transportation Association of Alabama and is a graduate of Harvard Kennedy School Executive Education's Senior Executives in State and Local Government program.

Kevin X. Shen is a Senior Analyst for the Clean Transportation Program at the Union of Concerned Scientists. In his role, he analyzes, communicates, and advocates for policies around public transit and transportation equity at the federal and state levels, while also supporting electrification of trucks and buses and analyzing the impacts of transportation related air pollution. With backgrounds in engineering, urban planning, and public policy, Kevin holds an MS in transportation as well as technology and policy from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a BSE in civil and environmental engineering from the University of Michigan.

Susan K. Thomas is President of the Melville Charitable Trust where she drives its grantmaking, investment strategies, and philanthropic partnerships. Under Susan's tenure the Trust has seeded the Partnership for Equitable and Resilient Communities, the Housing Narrative Lab, and the Framework for an Equitable COVID-19 Homelessness Response amongst others. While Program Director, her grant portfolio targeted housing affordability and she was instrumental in creating the Fund for Housing and Opportunity, a national non-partisan, cross-sector funder collaborative. Prior, Susan led "Unsheltered No More!," for the Atlanta Mayor, an initiative placing 1,000+ unhoused men, women, and children into permanent homes. She has led the design of a statewide foster family foundation for the Governor of Georgia and cochaired Atlanta's Responsible Relocation task force ensuring residents in Hope VI redevelopment communities were treated with dignity. Susan is a former Vice President of Community Investment and Area Development at the United Way of Greater Atlanta. Her corporate background included roles in accounting, management consulting, and strategic planning for Fortune 500 companies. Susan serves on several boards and is an Annie E. Casey Fellow. She holds an MBA from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern and a B.S from the University of Maryland.

Shruti Vaidyanathan has more than 15 years of experience in the transportation sector. She is committed to creating equitable, Shruti Vaidyanathan has more than 15 years of experience in the transportation sector. She is committed to creating equitable, low-carbon transportation systems by advocating for policy approaches at the federal, state, and local levels that combine vehicle electrification with passenger and freight mobility solutions. Before joining NRDC, Vaidyanathan was the Transportation Program director for the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy (ACEEE).