

A thriving vibrant St. Louis requires the recognition that all our neighborhoods and residents have the right to a livable, healthy community. Healthy food access should not require two bus rides and several dollars each way. Children walking to school in the morning should not have to gamble on whether a person driving will stop at an intersection or not for them. Jobs should be safely reachable for everyone by car, bus, bike, or train so that all people have a chance to be successful. And in St. Louis, we recognize that a low-stress biking and walking network is part of the foundation of creating a livable, healthy community.

However, transportation inequities caused by decades of white flight, public and private disinvestment in communities, and lack of public policy solutions have resulted in isolated neighborhoods that are physically cut off from thriving parts of the region.

Many of these efforts were intentional: supporting white flight from urban areas to suburban communities, interstates were routed through black middle-class neighborhoods to ensure that the middle-class whites could continue to go to their jobs and visit cultural areas like parks and museums. During this time, discriminatory policies like redlining were additionally used to make it nearly impossible for residents of poor neighborhoods to gain financial assistance, such as mortgages, from financial institutions. From these intentional decisions, we continue to see certain neighborhoods fall behind from lack of investment and planning.

Data shows, we need to plan for better walking and biking infrastructure going north and south. The 38 census tracts north of Delmar, are primarily Black, have the highest number of transit users and households without vehicles, and less population density coupled with lower life expectancy and higher concentrated poverty rates. Research also shows communities predominantly Black have less access to safe infrastructure and this fact is reflected in the number of pedestrian deaths.

For St. Louis to thrive, we need to address the barriers and recognize the assets that we have to create a livable, healthy community. From the various parks to cultural amenities to our unique neighborhoods, we know we have the destinations to become a leading city. That is why Trailnet launched a new vision for St. Louis where we connect places that matter with a cohesive network of protected bikeways and sidewalk improvements.

Through connecting with over 2,000 people from extensive stakeholder interviews, community and committee meetings, and surveys, we know walking and biking opportunities to parks, neighborhoods, and business districts are important to the region. About 85 percent of people who shared their input with Trailnet support a network of protected bikeways and improved sidewalks through their neighborhood. Most individuals shared this type of connection would help them enjoy walking and biking to local businesses, schools, and parks safely, even if that means slowing down traffic.

Trailnet's vision is guided by principles that include equity as a value. This requires an understanding of the systemic barriers within St. Louis and the role transportation planning had on community development to make meaningful changes. We are taking this information and learning about people's lived experiences into Trailnet's vision to create a plan that addresses these inequities to help change the narrative for St. Louis.

This November, Trailnet is sharing the proposed destinations to connect through a network of protected bikeways and sidewalk improvements to connect people to places that matter. Using a racial equity lens we are prioritizing communities of color and their transportation needs. As the process moves to the next phase of engagement, Trailnet will continue to listen to understand community priorities. We are developing a plan that is reflective of neighborhood and resident needs and desires for a low-stress biking and walking network.

This vision alone will not solve the systemic issues within St. Louis, but a well-designed network for multi-modal transportation is a key asset to help bring together our unique neighborhoods. In order to do this in a just way, we must develop a community supported plan with equity as a core value by working alongside our community.

Grace Kyung is the Special Projects Director at Trailnet and is a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Culture of Health Leader. Grace graduated from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign with a Master of Public Health and Master of Urban Planning. Grace can be contacted at grace@trailnet.org.