

# WHAT IS EQUITABLE RAIL SERVICE?



## DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

By Barry Cassidy

As social mores and values change, so do the programs offered by various agencies of government. Things become popular, and there are buzz words that are used and not fully understood. One of the things that have been given more prominence recently in the news media is the concept of "equity."

People talk about equity all the time but really, what does it mean? Changes in how things have worked in the past and how they will affect the future are being examined. Throughout its history, the United States government has been providing equality to its citizens. Equality has to do with giving everyone the same resources. The theory is that everyone has the same chance to do well. Equity involves distributing resources based on the needs of the recipients.

The question that everyone has to ask themselves is, does everyone get an equal chance in life?

Does an average person have the same access to resources as others in their cohort group? When I was growing up, my mother's side of my family spoke Italian most of the time, but when the kids and grandkids came around, everyone spoke English. The family elders wanted us to be an American and have the same chances as every American. They did not want us to be discriminated against because they spoke broken English. They sacrificed their way to make my life better for their children.

I grew up in the '50s, and early '60s and my mom was a housewife and my dad a union organizer. He provided for us, and like many kids of the '60s, we flocked to colleges. Society watched as women gained equal footing in admissions to colleges and entered the workforce in mass in the early '70s. The self-exertion of

rights of being a human being in the workforce was expanded to include women. During that period, even though there could be a desire to participate in the workforce, most women got married and became June Cleaver, even if they did not wear pearls and a dress all of the time.

I had a chance to excel, but did I have the same chance as someone who had parents that were much better off than my parents? My dad made a good living, but we were not rich. When I started applying to colleges, at my dad's insistence, did I have the same chance to get into Harvard as a legacy candidate who had a father that graduated from Harvard? Most likely not.

What if my father was an alcoholic that could not hold a job and my mom was a black woman from North Philly? What if I had been forced into a hyper-segregated housing situation because my dad was so erratic in his employment and I was of mixed race? Would my chances of success be limited more than just using broken English to communicate?

When building generational wealth, do the families that started doing so generations before mine have a better chance? Did the son of an alcoholic rich guy with a black wife have a better chance than I had? Does the government need to focus resources on me because generations ago, we were late in coming to America, or we had a nimrod dad or a black mother?

(Continued on page 54)

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(Continued from page 53)

My questions could easily be answered if there was equality from the beginning, but that was not always the case. I grew up in Fords New Jersey, and my school was 99.9 percent white. In time, I noticed that there was casual racism in how people conducted themselves. For the most part, black people did not attend my school. They could not buy a house in the area where I lived because of whatever mechanisms were used in my town to keep black people out. I also do not remember too many poor people being around. There was equality in my community, but it was equality for my white middle-class peers.

There was pressure too. Pressure to be like my fellow students to shun black people. Since my dad was a union organizer, we had many black people come to our house because they had an issue at work and stopped by to discuss their grievance or their desire to join the Steelworkers Union. That did not go over well with some of the other kids, who made mention that there were times that my mom was alone with black people in the house.

This spoken/unspoken and almost subliminal reinforcement of separation of race, income level, and access to what others felt entitled brings us to the calls for equity. As I work on the train line from Reading to Philadelphia or, as I refer to it, "The Phoenixville Line," I reflect on the following:

The City of Reading would benefit from introducing a rail service to connect the 35.4 percent of the population living in poverty to job centers and the naturally occurring affordable housing located along the route.

The current homeownership rate in Reading of 39.4 percent is significantly lower than the national average of 63.9 percent. The city averages less than the "one car per family" national average and

has an average 24.3-minute drive time to places of employment.

The introduction of accessible and affordable transportation for everyone in the community will result in fair distribution of transportation resources and benefits and increase transportation choice and impact.

The poverty rate further down the proposed line the 19 percent of the population of Pottstown, 14.3 percent of the population of Royersford, and the 10 percent of the population living in Phoenixville will benefit from the increased mobility options to job centers. The connection to the transit grid will provide limitless options for low to moderate-income people in both housing and employment.

The project is a true "Equitable Transit" effort and should be marketed as such when the project is proposed for federal funding. The quality of the transportation access made available through the creation of this line will enhance people's economic and social opportunities. The project would affect development along the line creating housing accessibility, affecting land values and local economic activity.

The project would use Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) and other programs on a state level to create a vibrant funding scheme. Normally CDBG is not a significant part of transit funding, but that might not be true in this case. There should be an effort to research if a corridor-wide coordinated economic strategy for the areas will receive an increased valuation. It would be appropriate to maximize new tax ratable activity in a coordinated effort that could include job creation and affordable housing near stations located along the Phoenixville Equitable Transit Line.

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