Roads, transit systems, water and sewer lines, and other basic infrastructure are the backbone of communities and their function is critical to our economy. However, state choices about where to invest in infrastructure projects have often left out some communities, particularly Black and Brown communities. Two tools for building more equitable and sustainable infrastructure in Maryland include improving public transportation services and increasing broadband access. Low-income Marylanders and Marylanders of color disproportionately suffer from inadequate public transportation services and lack internet access and tools, making it all the more vital that these issues are addressed as we work towards a more equitable Maryland.

**Transportation**

Prosperity in Maryland depends on effective transportation networks to bring people and goods to and from the market. It is required to obtain and maintain a well-paying job, as you have to be able to get there in order to work. A 21st century transportation system needs to integrate and accommodate a variety of methods of transportation. However, the direction that has been taken with transportation policy in Maryland in the recent past has been misdirected.

- Nearly a quarter of trains and other transit vehicles in the state are past their useful life. This is a problem, as broken-down vehicles cause delays and make public transportation less safe for those taking advantage of the service as well as the general public.
- In 2015, Governor Hogan cancelled the planned Red Line light rail which would have made it easier for people (and especially those without their own car) living in West Baltimore to access jobs and services. Instead, neighborhoods were destroyed and there was no Red Line light rail to show for all the destruction.
• As a result of past transportation and housing policy decisions, research shows that Black workers in Maryland lose more time each year to long commutes compared to white workers. Marylanders of color have fewer cars than white Marylanders on average and are more likely to live in areas that are less suitable for driving due to congestion and expensive parking, which means public transportation is especially important to Marylanders of color. Research shows that Marylanders who take public transportation spend an extra 66.3% of their time commuting and three times as many Marylanders of color depend on public transit as white residents.

**Recent Investments in Transportation**

This year, there were some steps towards increasing the state’s investment in transit service.

• **The Transit Safety and Investment Act** - During the 2021 session, the General Assembly tried to dedicate consistent funding for repairs and improvements throughout the MTA transit system, including buses, light rail lines, and MARC trains. Such investments are critical to both the state’s economy and meeting emissions reduction goals. However, Gov. Hogan vetoed the legislation. Legislators should overturn the veto the next time they convene.

• **Federal American Rescue Plan** – State policymakers plan to use $500 million of the state’s American Rescue Plan funds to support transportation projects.

**Addressing Transportation Needs**

What else can be done to address the state’s transportation needs?

• Invest in reliability – Marylanders of color and low-income Marylanders are more likely to rely on transit systems. An equitable transportation system requires investing in reliable, accessible transit service.

• Improve bus service - More buses should be put on the road to increase frequency of buses travelling a route. Tools like bus rapid transit, dedicated bus lanes or traffic signals that give priority to buses can help provide much faster, more efficient bus service to Marylanders who depend on public buses as their method of transportation. Additionally, improved bus service should be targeted to areas with longest average commutes (such as Prince George’s County) and widest difference in commutes between white and Black residents (such as East and West Baltimore).

• Increase access to cars – The state should explore ways to make low-cost insurance policies available to those who are priced out of private insurance options. Maryland should end counterproductive practices such as suspending drivers licenses for unpaid fines as it creates a problematic cycle that makes it harder for people to afford and maintain the legal ability to drive.

• Address residential segregation - The most influential tool to address transportation isn’t actually within the realm of the state transportation budget. Even when controlling for income, Black Marylanders tend to live in lower-income, higher-poverty neighborhoods than their white counterparts. This has a great impact on transportation as it means Black Marylanders are more likely in positions in which they have to rely on public transportation. Maryland should invest in affordable and integrated housing and work to eliminate discrimination by landlords.
Baltimore lags behind most cities, ranking 29th out of 32 cities of a similar size for both home broadband adoption and for having a laptop or desktop computer in the home. Nearly 41 percent of Baltimore residents do not have broadband internet service and approximately one in three Baltimore City households do not have either a desktop or laptop computer. As services increasingly move online, this lack of access affects an increasing number of essential activities— from completing schoolwork to searching for job opportunities. For many communities of color and lower-income households, the lack of internet or a computer compounds the existing gaps in educational attainment and financial security. While smartphone ownership has become much more prevalent in the last decade, this is not an adequate substitute for a desktop computer or laptop, especially not for education.

As of the fall of 2020, an estimate 185,000 Maryland homes lacked internet access and approximately 425,000 Marylanders lacked high-speed broadband internet. These households and individuals find themselves at a growing disadvantage, which was made more acute with the COVID-19 pandemic moving work, school, social functions and more online. The digital divide isn’t just about having the ability to stay connected to loved ones. It is the difference of students being able to be present in class or missing out entirely, the difference of being able to start a business or not. Almost 11 percent of households in Maryland do not have an internet subscription and 34.5 percent of Marylanders live in areas in which there in only one internet provider, which can drive up costs. In addition, 3.8 percent of Marylanders live in areas where there is no broadband infrastructure that provides speeds that are even minimally acceptable.

Recent Investments in Broadband

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the disparities in broadband access and led to additional investments in improving access:

- **American Rescue Plan** – State policymakers plan to use about $300 million in federal relief funds for improving network infrastructure, providing free or reduced-cost service and devices to low-income Marylanders, and providing grants to municipal broadband services.
- **The Digital Connectivity Act of 2021** – This bill created an Office of Statewide Broadband, building on an existing program focused on rural broadband access. This new office will ensure that all Marylanders have access to high-quality broadband internet service at an affordable price and that they have the tools needed to utilize it. The goal is to connect all Marylanders to reliable broadband internet by the end 2026.
Effectively use federal funds to invest in broadband infrastructure and access where it is most needed. Funding from the American Rescue Plan and potential future federal support should be used to invest in broadband infrastructure in communities that private companies have not invested in, as well as providing funding to help people purchase internet access.

Creating and sustaining private-public partnerships - Private-public partnerships are a vital tool in the effort to bridge the digital divide in Maryland. Carriers that offer more affordable prices often struggle to get the word out, so partnering with public institutions like schools and libraries would greatly benefit their ability to connect with low-income residents to provide affordable access.

Utilize the new statewide broadband office effectively - Maryland experienced a notable policy victory with the establishment of the Office of Statewide Broadband, but it is essential that the office is used effectively. The office needs to develop a standard definition of broadband, collect data from internet providers, create audits of different internet measurables in each county, and assist local jurisdictions in efforts to identify funding sources and improve access.

Baltimore City and other jurisdictions can make additional changes on a local level to expand access:

- Enhance the capability of community institutions like libraries and nonprofits to provide technological support and digital skills training
- Enlist a wide range of community stakeholders to address digital inequality

What challenges do you experience with the transportation and broadband infrastructure in Maryland? What policy changes or new investments would improve things for your community?