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# Community-Based Planning as a Source of Political Change

## *The Transit Equity Movement of Los Angeles' Bus Riders Union*

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Metropolitan regions in the U.S. are increasingly turning to public transit to address the serious problems of air pollution and traffic congestion. But they may not be capable of simultaneously luring suburban commuters out of their cars while maintaining good access to dispersing metropolitan opportunities for people who cannot drive. After an expensive rail rapid transit system to the suburbs was built in Los Angeles, a grassroots citizen movement used a civil rights lawsuit to force policymakers to meet the needs of poor, minority bus riders in the inner city. This article demonstrates a link between politics and planning by first identifying the crucial political changes, using a model from social movement theory, then examining how planning skills were used by citizen activists when they induced these changes. It suggests a new direction for equity planning, in which practice is based in community institutions acting as a complement to government planning.

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If planners do not learn how to take action in political settings, they risk failing to make constructive change. And sometimes to do this, planners must take their skills to the grassroots and oppose government plans. In Los Angeles, a social movement of grassroots activists challenged government plans and forced a shift in transportation policy. The steps these activists took can teach planners how to respond successfully to the opportunities and obstacles they are likely to face when they act politically.

In 1994, a community-based organization of bus riders in Los Angeles, calling themselves the Bus Riders Union (BRU), demanded that the local transit authority improve inner-city bus service before proceeding with expensive plans for rail rapid transit to the suburbs. By organizing directly on buses, the group won tangible benefits through the courts in what ABC television news called "one of the biggest civil rights lawsuits in America" (Rooney, 1996). The 1994 lawsuit was the first to successfully challenge transit agency decisions on the basis of discrimination, and the result legally bound the transit agency to improve inner-city bus service and gave bus riders a formal role in the planning process (Burrington & Heart, 1998; Kelley, 1996; Mann, 1997; Taylor & Garrett, 1998).

Studies of the movement attributed the BRU's success primarily to organizing skills that enabled the BRU to put together a broad coalition of diverse interests. Historical accounts stressed coalition building across lines of race and class (Brown, 1998; Mann, 1996, 1997). A similar movement in New York failed, according to one explanation, from playing down the issue of racial injustice (Kelley, 1996). Taylor and Garrett (1998), in a detailed study of the transit agency in Los Angeles, contended that the BRU disrupted the planning process by forging an ideologically mixed coalition of "strange bedfellows." They persuasively argued that the case offers a promising new path

for equity planning in which planners could play a mediating role among widely disparate political interests.

Other social movements have failed despite building such coalitions, suggesting that actions other than good organizing were involved in this case (Meyer & Rochon, 1997; Staggenborg, 1986). By focusing on the steps people took to change the balance of political power, this study defines a role for community-based planners in redistributive politics. *Community-based planners* are defined here as professional planners who, like equity planners, “pay particular attention to the needs of poor and vulnerable populations” (Krumholz & Forrester, 1990, p. 210). But unlike most equity planners, they contest government plans from a base of support outside government institutions (Leavitt, 1994).

This case also addresses several unresolved questions that block the path to a new model of equity planning. Earlier models of equity planning were limited by a narrow focus on professionals “working in official capacities for city governments” (Krumholz & Clavel, 1994, p. 1). Since government planners do not tend to step up for people who have few choices, where might community-based planners look for guidance in contesting public decisions that harm poor people? Some say that equity planning succeeds when its practitioners fluidly improvise, as Taylor and Garrett (1998) observed in the BRU case, to unite a complex mix of political interests (Clavel, 1994; Marris, 1994). But what are the signals that help a planner take concrete steps while improvising? Also, even though planning is increasingly recognized as an explicitly political activity, planners have not been inclined to incorporate political power into their work (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Friedmann, 1998a). Indeed, even though more planners now recognize that their work is as much a political process as a technical one, many who “think politically” still fail to “act politically” (Baum, 1983, p. 14). Several scholars have recently argued for planners to act politically by taking their skills to the grassroots level as an insurgent and contentious—but constructive—complement to government planning (Beauregard, 1995; Friedmann, 1998b; Holston, 1998; Sandercock, 1998). But despite the promising emergence of insurgency in planning theory, practicing planners have few examples from real-world cases to demystify the connection between politics and planning (Baum, 1996; Flyvbjerg, 1998).

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate a link between politics and planning. It applies a “political process model” to clarify how a social movement emerges and progresses, using news articles, documents produced by the BRU, and interviews with participants. The first step identifies the key political changes that explain the BRU’s success. The second step analyzes the

skills activists used during the events that led to the key political changes, with the aim of identifying techniques associated with planning. When they shaped and seized the decisive political opportunities, the movement leaders and their citizen allies used techniques that planners are trained to use.<sup>1</sup>

## MTA vs BRU: A Clash over Transit’s Purpose

Transit advocacy movements in other cities have used legal tactics similar to those used in the Los Angeles case with little success. Lawsuits in Philadelphia in 1990 and New York in 1995 claimed that transit agencies discriminated against racial minorities in their allocation of transit resources, citing Title VI of the Civil Rights Act (*Committee for a Better No. Philadelphia. v. SE Pennsylvania Transportation Authority*, 1990; *New York Urban League v. State of New York*, 1995).<sup>2</sup> But the courts in these cases found insufficient evidence to support the plaintiffs’ claims. The circumstances and the skills of movement leaders help explain why a judge ruled differently in Los Angeles, forcing the transit agency to make changes that benefit inner-city bus riders.

Problems of traffic congestion and air pollution in Los Angeles are almost legendary. The population continues to grow rapidly, automobile travel grows even faster, and building more freeway capacity is virtually out of the question, for lack of money and political support. Even though California started running out of money to build freeways as early as the 1960s (Taylor, 1995), Los Angeles was slow in accepting alternatives. While other large cities such as Washington, DC, and San Francisco managed to compensate for an abrupt decline in freeway building by constructing new rail rapid transit systems, Los Angeles’ rail proposals were stymied for decades. Political and business leaders had frequently and vigorously pushed for rail rapid transit since the 1940s, but no proposal satisfied the fragmented political interests in Los Angeles, where land development has long been widely dispersed (Adler, 1987). Voters rejected ballot measures for rail transit in 1968, 1974, and 1976 (Adler, 1987; Whitt, 1979). Finding a fix for the region’s massive transportation problems eventually became a top objective of public policy, generating “extremely high levels of public awareness and concern, and a continuing sense of urgency among regional officials” (Wachs, 1993, p. 330).

## A Controversial Response to Transportation Problems

In 1980, voters in Los Angeles County were ready to try something new. They narrowly approved Proposition

A, a ballot measure specifically designed to satisfy the disparate geopolitical interests of the region. A sales tax of 0.5% funded new subway and rail construction, but 25% of the revenues were returned to local governments to appease suburban interests, and low-income advocates got a bus fare reduction for 3 years (Adler, 1986). Voters approved an additional 0.5% sales tax hike in 1990. The ambitious new rail program led to several projects, including several urban rail lines radiating from the central core of Los Angeles and a network of railroads connecting the central business district (CBD) with outlying suburbs (see Figure 1). The first to open was the Blue Line in 1990, running south from the CBD to Long Beach, with a later extension north to Pasadena. The Red Line opened in 1993 as a heavy rail route that crosses the Blue Line in the CBD and includes a downtown subway segment. Rounding out the urban rail system, the Green Line opened in 1995 as another light rail line that crosses the Blue Line south of the CBD in an east-west direction, from Norwalk to Redondo Beach, with a connection to the Los Angeles International Airport. The commuter rail system, called Metrolink, consists of several lines of heavy rail that extend into five counties beyond the Los Angeles County boundary.<sup>3</sup>

The choice of rail as the solution to the transportation mess was highly controversial. Critics from across the political spectrum insisted that rail was far too expensive and inappropriate for Los Angeles' geography of dispersed economic activity. They warned that rail would not attract enough riders, that it would do little for congestion and air pollution, and that it would siphon away subsidies from the more cost-effective bus system (Richmond, 1998). Some charged that rail was a new manifestation of old-fashioned pork-barrel politics, with powerful interests lining up behind a growth machine cranking out personal gain (Bundy, 2000; Wachs, 1996). Shrewd politicians, some claimed, sold rail to the public dishonestly by creating an elaborate myth that rail transit was the one-and-only answer (Richmond, 1998). "What you've got is a fascination by elected officials with trains," argued one critic. "The whole system is driven by the political need to do something splashy . . . regardless of whether it makes sense" (Markman, 1996, p. B1).

Rail advocates, for their part, countered with good arguments of their own. They claimed that rail is essential for the region's future because it would restrict sprawl, reduce air pollution, save energy, and relieve the city's notorious freeway congestion. Billions of federal dollars dedicated to rail construction provided yet more incentive. Without a rail project, some argued, Los Angeles would lose out to other metropolitan regions competing for this federal "use-it-or-lose-it" money. "Several decades ago, people had the same questions about

spending billions for freeways," explained Larry Zarian, former Chair of the transit agency's board of directors. "Our investment in rail today is going to likewise prove to be one of the most important transportation accomplishments of our time" (Markman, 1996, p. B1).

### *Troubles for the Rail Program*

Regardless of arguments for and against rail, the program placed an enormous toll on public resources. Capital costs alone have amounted to \$6 billion. To cover these and other costs, the transit agency accumulated a debt of \$7 billion that will burden county taxpayers for decades to come (Rabin, 1998). But fiscal troubles were not the only drawbacks of the rail program stirring up public debate. The transit agency's reputation with the public eroded with a series of political setbacks.

The agency was born in controversy. In 1992, the state legislature created the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) by merging the agency that operated the bus system with another that controlled the transit funding from Proposition A. Critics of the rail plans claimed that the merger was a move by prorail politicians to weaken the bus faction (Taylor & Garrett, 1998). The dissension within the agency between pro- and antirail interests would linger for years (Mann & Mathis, 1997). To illustrate the degree of infighting, two chief executive officers were fired by the MTA board, first Neil Peterson in 1993 then Franklin White in 1995, after publicly aired disputes with board members over the fiscal crisis (Markman & Simon, 1996).

Then came a number of highly publicized and embarrassing blunders. The first was a number of construction accidents, including one christened the "Hollywood Sinkhole" when parts of Hollywood Boulevard collapsed, damaging buildings, pipes, and the renowned "Walk of Fame" (Davis, 1995). Transit officials had ignored warnings of a likely collapse nearly a year before (Markman & Simon, 1996). Then in 1995, the Federal Transit Administration took the unusual step of withholding federal funds and halting construction of the Red Line to force changes in its management (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1996a). Even more troubling were charges of corruption. The Justice Department investigated the MTA for fraud, leading to an arrest by the FBI of a top administrator running a kickback scheme. The MTA was accused of shredding incriminating documents, leaking secret data to contractors, and disguising conflicts of interest. Property owners filed a \$3 billion lawsuit charging influence peddling. The state legislature finally intervened and uncovered rigged bidding and questionable campaign contributions by contractors (Davis, 1995).

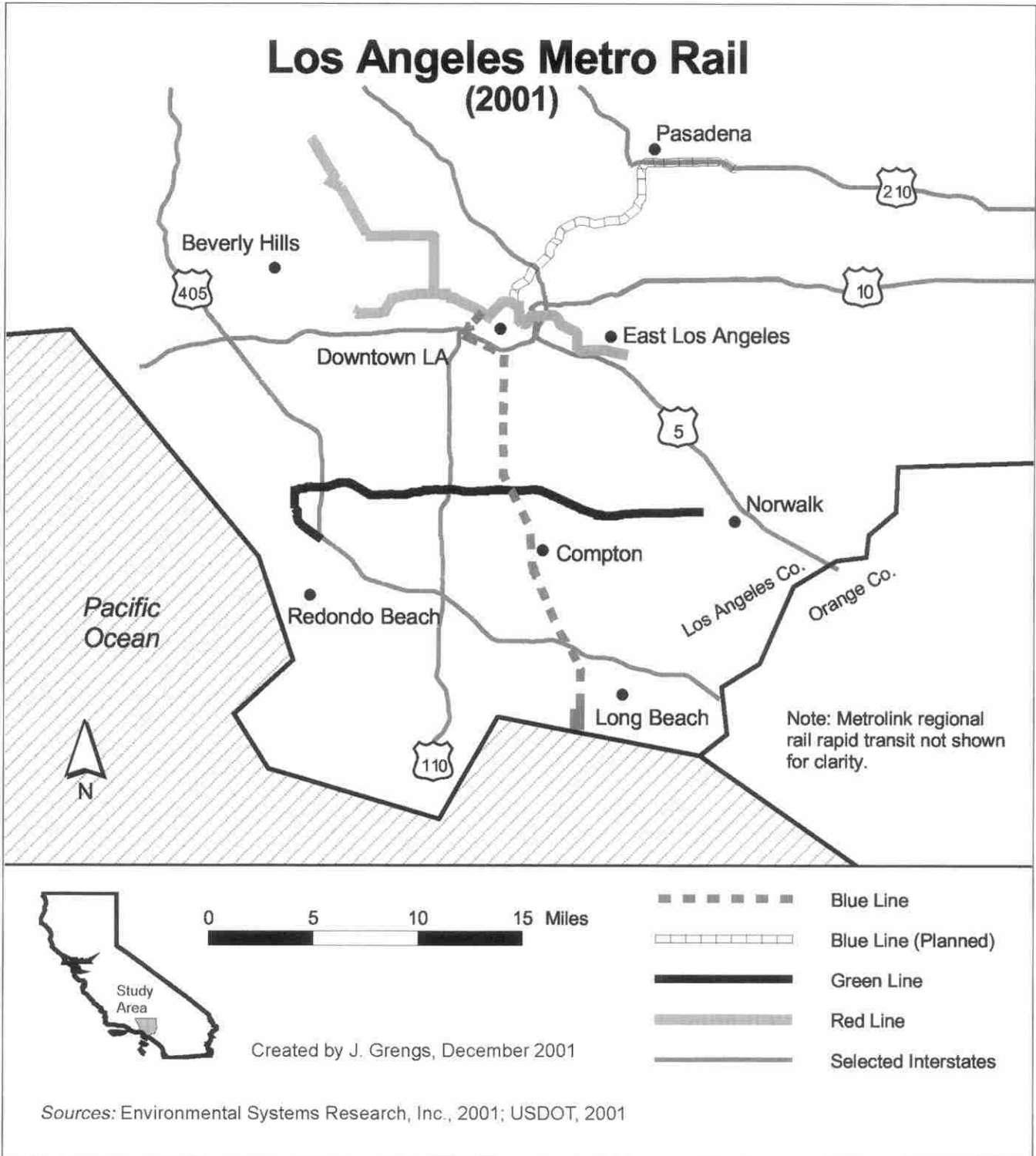


FIGURE 1. Los Angeles commuter rail system in 2001.

### **Organizing Opposition**

The Labor/Community Strategy Center (LCSC) emerged at the forefront of several community-based organizations to begin scrutinizing the distressed rail program. The LCSC was founded by political activist Eric Mann in 1989. Mann brought connections and diverse experience from earlier campaigns, including protesting the closing of a General Motors plant, fighting toxic emissions from oil refineries, and supporting immigrant rights by opposing Proposition 187. The LCSC's goal was to be a "multiracial 'think-tank/act-tank' . . . to help build democratic, internationalist Left social movements at the intersection of ecology, civil rights, workers' and immigrants' rights, and a direct challenge . . . to transnational corporations" (LCSC, 1997, p. 1). The organization approached transit issues from the viewpoint of social justice, forming a Transportation Policy Group in 1991 to campaign for the interests of low-income bus riders.

The LCSC discovered injustice in the rail program. For one thing, the sales tax that paid for rail was inherently regressive because it disproportionately burdened low-income people. But more troubling to the LCSC was the prospect that the MTA would create a "separate and unequal" transit system. They alleged that the MTA was taking resources away from buses to build the rail lines, in effect harming bus riders who are disproportionately low-income and minority. Sixty percent of the MTA's overall ridership earned less than \$15,000 per year, compared to just 20% of all households in Los Angeles County (Taylor & Garrett, 1998). Minorities made up 80% of transit riders—including buses, urban rail, and commuter rail—but only 28% of Metrolink's suburban commuter rail lines. As for the urban rail lines, MTA projections showed that minorities would be disproportionately underrepresented. The Red Line, for example, was expected to serve a ridership of 66% minority, substantially less than the systemwide average of 80%. Furthermore, although 94% of the MTA's customers were bus riders, the MTA was spending 70% of its budget on the 6% of its ridership that were rail passengers (NAACP Legal Defense Fund, 1996a, p. 15). At the same time that funding was shifted to rail, the MTA cut back on bus service: In terms of *vehicle-revenue miles*—a measure of the total distance served by buses—bus service dropped over 8% between 1988 and 1992. Disparities were reflected in subsidies to passengers, too. Public subsidies to the Blue Line were estimated at \$128 million per year, enough to subsidize 17 of the MTA's 22 busiest bus lines. MTA documents show that the average subsidy per passenger for bus riders in 1992 was \$1.17 compared to 10 times more for Blue Line riders at \$11.34. And according to MTA

forecasts, commuter rail subsidies were expected to average \$21.02 per passenger, 18 times more than for the typical bus rider (Rubin, 1993).

### **The MTA's Next Step Sparks a Lawsuit**

The high cost of the rail program forced the MTA to look for new revenues. When the MTA proposed in early 1994 to raise the bus fare from \$1.10 to \$1.35, eliminate monthly passes used by many poor bus riders, and cut service on several bus lines, the LCSC mobilized bus riders to demonstrate at a public hearing (Mann, 1996). Despite the protest, the MTA board approved the proposal in June 1994. Then, just 7 days later, the MTA board voted to spend an additional \$123 million on the next phase of the rail program.

The LCSC then formed the Bus Riders Union, composed of 1,500 dues-paying members, mostly low-income bus riders, to mobilize opposition with public protests and disruption of MTA board meetings. The BRU's immediate objective was to stop the fare increase. Other demands included reinstating the monthly pass, increasing bus service to reduce overcrowding, and imposing a moratorium on the rail project. Movement leaders built a mass base by conducting recruitment campaigns directly on the buses, passing out bilingual leaflets and informing riders about transportation policy. To stop the fare hike, the BRU eventually assembled a coalition to file a class action lawsuit against the MTA on behalf of 350,000 bus riders, with the help of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (*Labor/Community Strategy Center v. Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority*, 1994).<sup>4</sup>

The lawsuit made two major claims: first, that the MTA's policies had the effect of discriminating against minorities in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination in federally funded projects; second, that the MTA was intentionally discriminating against minority bus riders in violation of the 14th Amendment and Title VI. At a federal court hearing in September 1994, with the guidance of the NAACP's Bill Lann Lee (who would later be appointed to a civil rights post at the Justice Department), the coalition presented substantial documentation and expert witnesses in support of its claims.

Immediately following the hearing, the court issued a temporary restraining order to prevent the MTA from raising the bus fare. The judge held that the BRU had presented "more than sufficient evidence" to support the claim of "disparate impact" on minorities, and had "raise[d] serious questions going to the merits" on the claim of intentional discrimination (NAACP Legal Defense Fund, 1996a, p. 2). By contrast, the MTA produced insufficient evidence to rebut the BRU's claims and, furthermore, failed to satisfy their burden of demonstrating

that the fare increase was required by necessity. Responding to MTA appeals, the court later modified the injunction in January 1995 by allowing the fare to increase pending trial.

Two years after the lawsuit was filed, the bus riders and the MTA settled the case with a consent decree, signed on October 29, 1996 (NAACP Legal Defense Fund, 1996b). The MTA got its fare increase to \$1.35. But the decree secured advantages for transit-dependent riders, committing the MTA to adopt as its "highest priority, improvement of the quality of bus service in Los Angeles" (NAACP Legal Defense Fund, 1996b, p. 1). Four of the most important gains included (1) restructured fares that reduced the monthly pass from \$49 to \$42, added \$21 semimonthly and \$11 weekly passes to assist riders who cannot afford the monthly pass, and added discount off-peak fares of 75 cents on selected lines; (2) commitments, with specific targets and deadlines, to increase the bus fleet; (3) establishment of a Joint Working Group of MTA representatives and bus riders to ensure implementation; and (4) provision of a court-appointed mediator to resolve disputes and monitor compliance for 10 years.

The consent decree was an important achievement but it was by no means a complete victory: The MTA got its fare increase, the rail program was not stopped, and the MTA has still not fully complied with the decree, prompting intervention by the courts and protests by the BRU that continue today (Rabin, 2000; Sterngold, 1999). On the other hand, the BRU movement was a success by several measures. First, it is the only case of its kind to gain a favorable ruling in the courts. Second, the MTA came to accept the BRU as a valid stakeholder with legitimate interests, as evidenced by the Joint Working Group. Third, the BRU has attracted wide attention to its cause. Newspapers and politicians recognize the BRU as a legitimate representative of transit-dependent bus riders, and advocacy groups in other cities have invited the BRU to help with similar movements. Finally, transit-dependent bus riders won new and lasting benefits.

### ***Planning and the Purpose of Public Transit***

Complete victory or not, the case illustrates a puzzle that most big cities will increasingly face as population disperses, poverty concentrates at the core, and transit costs outpace revenues: *What is the purpose of transit?* Should transit get drivers out of their cars, or should it serve people who have few transportation alternatives? Building a rail system seems like a sensible solution for Los Angeles because, compared to other big cities, an unusually large share of its commuters drive cars. In 1990, 88% of all commuters in the metropolitan region drove to work alone, compared to just 79% in Chicago and 63%

in New York (U.S. Department of Transportation, 1996). The flow of work-bound traffic is also distinct compared to that of other large cities: In 1980, only 24% of all work trips into the Los Angeles CBD were by transit, compared to 74% in Chicago and 60% in New York (Fielding, 1995). Getting people out of their cars is a common goal nationwide in the fight against air pollution and traffic congestion, which in Los Angeles are consistently among the worst in the nation. And whether suburban rail projects disproportionately benefit Whites is less clear in Los Angeles than in other places because suburban Los Angeles is far more diverse racially and ethnically than the suburbs of most cities, although with high degrees of racial segregation.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, a hub-and-spoke rail system oriented toward the CBD does not serve well those dependent on transit in highly fragmented Los Angeles, partly because of the historical dominance of the automobile (Grengs, 2001). Jobs and activity centers are more widely dispersed than in most metropolitan regions. One study identified 28 distinct subcenters—relatively dense clusters of businesses outside the CBD—in Los Angeles and Orange Counties in 1980. CBD employment was only half of the total employment of these scattered subcenters. Even if a rail network managed to connect these many subcenters, its effectiveness would still be limited because two thirds of all metropolitan jobs are located outside both the subcenters and the CBD (Giuliano & Small, 1991).

The dilemma of serving either "choice" or "captive" riders gets even more complicated. To lure people out of their cars requires highly attractive service. And attractive service means higher costs for cash-strapped agencies, especially for distant, low-density suburbs. Keeping transit-dependent customers, by contrast, does not require good service because these riders have no other choice. That transit officials like those of the MTA would divert resources away from inner-city buses should not be surprising in this context. But when trying to balance these competing objectives, do these officials tip the scale too far by making transit-dependent riders pay higher fares to cover the extra costs of suburban transit? Does the Constitution's protection against racial discrimination provide guidance in assessing this balance? Citizen activists are raising questions like these in a number of cities today. And planners may have a say in their outcome. Indeed, professional planners are duty-bound to face up to this transit dilemma by their code of ethics, even if the code itself imposes an analogous dilemma by simultaneously requiring a planner to "faithfully serve the public interest" (Solín, 1997, p. 4) and to "recogniz[e] a special responsibility to plan for the needs of disadvantaged groups" (p. 6).

## A Model of Social Movement Politics

In the political process model, a social movement is a fortuitous confluence of three factors, one external and two internal to the movement's organization. Social movements succeed when *political opportunities* expand, when movement leaders build sufficient *organizational strength* to maintain links to a mass base, and when leaders strategically *frame issues* in ways that appeal to the values of potential participants (McAdam, 1995). Even though all three factors are necessary, the key to how a movement gains momentum is the expansion of political opportunities—the single external factor. Expanding political opportunities outside the movement organization signal leaders to use their organization's internal resources to mobilize for collective action (Eisinger, 1973; McAdam, 1982).

Tarrow (1994) defines *political opportunity structure* as “consistent—but not necessarily formal or permanent—dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure” (p. 85). Collective action emerges not when groups experience hardship or deprivation—these preconditions are fairly constant—but when people find a permissive political environment and then seize opportunities through openings in institutions and instabilities in political alignments. An example of such a political shift is the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The court ruling gave new hope to civil rights activists everywhere, changing their expectations and encouraging them to take action. Martin Luther King, Jr. would cite this case as a source of inspiration when in 1955 he and other Black leaders launched the Montgomery bus boycott (King, 1958). The model's focus on changes external to the challenging group helps to show that shifts in the political environment may allow even vulnerable groups that lack resources to forge advantages for themselves against powerful opponents (Tarrow, 1994; Tilly, 1978). But opportunities alone do not cause protest; two other factors, according to this model, are also necessary.

First, groups are more likely to seize political opportunities when they have strong internal organizations, the “collective vehicles, both formal and informal, through which people come together and engage in collective action” (McAdam et al., 1997b, p. 155). To illustrate, the Black church was crucial for initiating and sustaining the Montgomery bus boycott. After the arrest of Rosa Parks, Montgomery's Baptist ministers organized the first meeting at King's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where “virtually every organization in the [Black] community was represented” (King, 1958, p. 46). The church

offered a strong network of parallel social institutions, providing ready access to allies like the NAACP, lawyers, White ministers, and Black taxi drivers who pledged their support. It provided material resources such as telephones and mimeographs. And the church provided free spaces for participants to share in a common struggle, to strategize, sing, pray, and renew their courage (Evans & Boyte, 1986; King, 1958).

Second, a framing process builds a shared understanding among movement participants and mediates between the structural conditions of opportunity and the mobilizing potential of internal organization (McAdam et al., 1996; Snow et al., 1986). To make collective action viable, a sufficiently large number of people must recognize and interpret political shifts: “No opportunity, however objectively open, will invite mobilization unless it is (a) visible to potential challengers and (b) perceived as an opportunity” (McAdam et al., 2001, p. 43). Framing helps “produce shared definitions of what is happening” (p. 16) so that would-be participants can make sense of trends and see their opportunities. In the case of the Montgomery bus boycott, Martin Luther King, Jr. created a shared understanding by invoking morality. He framed the struggle around familiar symbols from the American Revolution and the Bible, redefining the oppression of Blacks as contrary to fundamental values like democracy, freedom, and religious faith. “We will be guided by the highest order of law and order,” King preached. “Our actions will be guided by the deepest principles of our Christian faith. Love must be our regulating ideal” (King, 1958, p. 62). This framing pulled in Whites and middle-class Blacks who share the fundamental values behind the symbols.

## Finding the Key Political Opportunities

In the transportation arena, several events at the national level appreciably opened access to transportation decisions, partly explaining the emergence of transit equity movements. In 1991, Congress passed the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), a federal bill that implemented the most dramatic changes in transportation since the interstate highway program was enacted in 1956. The law gave metropolitan regions unprecedented flexibility in how they spend money and created more transparency and accountability at local levels. It established stronger public participation rules and required consideration of social issues. Opportunities also expanded in 1994, when President Clinton signed an executive order to ensure that federal agencies do not adversely affect minority or low-income communities (Executive Order No. 12898, 1994).

While political opportunities expanded nationwide, Los Angeles was a place of highly unusual political instability in the early 1990s, making government plans susceptible to challenges. For instance, the beating of African American motorist Rodney King by White police officers in March 1991 was a jarring episode that caused enormous political turbulence, ultimately leading to riots in April 1992. The anger and political divisions that followed these riots boosted an intense distrust of public leaders. The events also galvanized people of color. Polls following the beating showed a steady shift among Latinos toward supporting Blacks in their disapproval of the police force (Sonenshein, 1993).

More pertinent to the BRU cause were divisions within the controversial rail program that opened up political opportunities. Patterns of news coverage during the years just prior to the lawsuit reflected the MTA's political fallout. Reports of fraud, crime, scandal, breakdown of service, and abuse of privilege by the MTA steadily increased, from just 5 articles in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1989 to 49 in 1994.<sup>6</sup> The BRU did not cause the MTA's tarnished reputation, however. Only 4 of the 49 negative articles in 1994 were direct responses to the BRU. But with the fallout, the MTA became particularly vulnerable to challenges because it lost public legitimacy.

Another decisive shift occurred when the MTA threatened the interests of bus riders with its proposal to raise bus fares. The proposal sparked the principal show of public defiance, attracting over 800 protesters to a public hearing in April 1994. This threat to bus riders' interests alone, however, does not explain why protest emerged in Los Angeles; nearly every metropolitan region in the United States has raised fares in recent years, usually without sustained opposition (Black, 1995). This proposal likely ignited protest because it happened concurrently with the controversial rail program that the BRU portrayed as unjust. MTA board members asked for a fare increase even while continuing their pursuit of the expensive and increasingly unpopular rail program.

### ***Bus Riders Seize their Opportunities***

In this setting, BRU leaders took action in six ways to exploit political opportunities. First, they had built a network of organizational ties that was in place when the decisive opportunities appeared. The LCSC spent years cultivating what Tilly (1978) refers to as "netness," a dense web of informal links to allied activists. The network helped leaders turn out protesters at public hearings after the MTA proposed the fare hike. Second, with the transit agency at a disadvantage in the contest for public opinion, BRU leaders improved their chances

when they focused their protest squarely on the MTA as their primary target.

Third, the BRU designed a new organizing technique—what social movement theorists call a new "repertoire of contention" (Tarrow, 1994, p. 19)—specifically designed to overcome an organizational constraint distinctive to mass transit. Although other urban conflicts over issues of housing, neighborhood revitalization, or even highway projects are residential-place-based struggles, bus riders are usually dispersed and isolated from one another. Bus riders do not necessarily live in the same neighborhoods, attend the same churches, or work at the same factories—all of which would help provide the interpersonal ties and solidarity that is essential for supporting collective action. The BRU solved this problem by combining the familiar tactic of leafleting with the new tactic of addressing riders where their everyday experience and indignation is most salient—directly on the overcrowded buses themselves. As BRU organizer Martin Hernandez explained, "Since deindustrialization, buses are among the last public spaces where blue-collar people of all races still mingle" (Davis, 1995, p. 272).

Fourth, leaders forged alliances with influential activists and experts. Supporting organizations included Justice for Janitors, the Filipino Workers Center, the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund providing legal counsel, and several foundations providing financial assistance (Mann, 1996). And the BRU capitalized on the dissension within the MTA by working with several antirail planners within the agency. Some MTA insiders shared the BRU's fear that bus interests would become subordinate to rail under the new joint agency.<sup>7</sup>

Academic planners also helped the cause. Professor Martin Wachs of UC-Berkeley (and long at UCLA) was an early critic of the rail program (Wachs, 1986, 1993). By his account, the case demonstrates how power trumps rationality:

The [MTA] board of directors has limited understanding of transportation policy and ignores the excellent advice of its top managers in favor of self-serving political expediency. They award contracts to their campaign contributors no matter how . . . costly their decisions will be to future generations. (Wachs, 1996, p. 18)

Professor Brian Taylor of UCLA, who together with Wachs served as an expert witness for the BRU, wrote reports supporting BRU claims. One report substantiated that "as a group, minority riders pay substantially more for MTA services and receive lower average taxpayer subsidies than do White riders" (Taylor et al., 1995, p. 1). Planning Professor James Moore of USC has been one



of the most outspoken critics of the rail program and frequently contributed biting editorials to the *Los Angeles Times* (Moore, 1994; Moore & Rubin, 1996). He sharply denounced the MTA's 20-year plan for being partial to rail projects: "The plan is internally inconsistent, it's not thorough, it's unsystematic, logically incorrect, circular and self-serving" (Markman, 1996, p. B1).

A fifth BRU action held together this loose coalition. BRU leaders took the difficult step of compromising with their philosophically divergent allies. Building coalitions invites internal conflict (Kleidman & Rochon, 1997), and the BRU coalition was no exception. For example, even though Moore and Rubin publicly criticized the MTA in ways that benefited the BRU cause, they also wrote for the conservative Reason Foundation, often taking positions decidedly distinct from the BRU's. The BRU nevertheless maintained contact with Rubin for his technical expertise (R. Burgos, personal communication, April 30, 1998). And even though scholars wrote reports to back the BRU's claims, they also called for overhauling the fare structure in ways the BRU opposed. BRU leaders also vehemently opposed several provisions in the consent decree as negotiated by their legal counsel, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. But the BRU managed to accept these disappointments in the interests of the coalition.<sup>8</sup> Leaders managed these organizational tensions by narrowing the movement's focus onto the lawsuit, a concrete goal that held the fragile coalition focused and intact (Taylor & Garrett, 1998).

Finally, BRU organizers tried to motivate bus riders to participate by framing the issues around the easily recognized symbols of the civil rights movement. Framing mass transit in terms of civil rights linked bad bus service with other oppressions in the everyday lives of bus riders, most of whom were people of color:

Yeah, I never thought about that! Yeah, look at this bus. We're all of color. Not the same race, but we're all of color. We're poor. We're all waiting on the darn corner. We're all going to a job in general that doesn't pay us jack. And yeah, you have a good point. (del Barco, 1997, para. 19)

Racial discrimination formed the basis of the lawsuit, but whether a sense of racial injustice actually *motivated* bus riders to participate remains an open question. The BRU claims that their treatment of race was at the heart of building mass support. The political process model would suggest that the decision to use the civil rights frame integrated meaning among movement participants, provided a cognitive map for participants, and accentuated the high ground that several opportunities like ISTEAs presented. On the other hand, history suggests that racial identities can divide far more easily than

unite, and such divisions between Blacks and Latinos are acute in Los Angeles (Jackson & Preston, 1994; Oliver & Johnson, 1984). How did leaders unite bus riders across interethnic tensions, especially given the tradition of conflict in the city? Although race was central to the court case, this study's evidence is not strong enough to confirm whether race actually motivated bus riders to participate, leaving an important question for further study.

## Planning to Seize Opportunities

Effective planning is informed by a range of theories and a blend of both technical and social skills (Bolan, 2000), a useful combination for social-movement politics. Planning is by nature an interdisciplinary activity that helps planners gain access among disparate groups. As credentialed professionals, planners gain entrance to organizations with extralocal scope, learning about other cases and contexts. Planning also aims for a close connection between theory and practice, helping to bridge gaps between universities, governments, and the grassroots (Clavel, 1986). And planners are trained to analyze data, an expertise that can back up social movement claims by making information credible and understandable. This, in turn, attracts new allies who bring yet more expertise (Marris, 1994).

The political process model orients our attention in two dimensions. The first is the *external* opportunity structure, the changes in the political environment that are determined mostly by forces from outside the social movement organization. The second is the *internal* organizing and framing, composed of decisions from within the organization. Planners generally know less about external opportunities, which have more to do with understanding power, than they do about internal organizing and framing, which have more to do with interpersonal relations. Friedmann (1998a) recently cautioned fellow planners about their inability to recognize emerging configurations of power, claiming that "the biggest problem we face in theorising planning is our ambivalence about power" (p. 249). By contrast, planners have many examples for understanding interpersonal relations, including grassroots mobilizing (Heskin, 1991), strategic planning (Bryson, 1995), and communicative skills that help them negotiate conflict and flexibly mediate uncertain situations (Forester, 1989; Innes & Gruber, 1999).

The model helps to inform planners that in a political setting they must be good at organizing people and framing issues, but they must also be good at recognizing where, when, and at whom their actions should be directed. This is what BRU leaders did when they shifted

the available opportunities by taking actions that planners are skilled at doing. Two planning-related actions—designing counter-methodologies and fostering political participation—appear to have played decisive roles in seizing available opportunities in this case.

### ***Develop a Broad Counter-Methodology***

Any planning for social change requires a methodology: a technique for organizing complex information, a mode of inquiry for making sense of events, and a way to communicate with potential allies or refute opponents. Chin and Benne (1976) suggested that social change comes not just from normative persuasion and attention to power differences, but also from building knowledge through empirical investigation. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood this when he designed strategies of nonviolent resistance. In his *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*, King writes that the first of four strategic steps is “collection of the facts to determine if injustices are alive” (King, 1963, p. 4). King was masterful at persuading people to shift their thoughts and behavior. He used detailed evidence to appeal to the universal values that Blacks and Whites share, and showed people who are fearful of one another that they have more in common than they think.

The problem for planners is that they usually face opponents with more compelling methods. Altshuler’s (1965) enduring study of the planning process exemplified the planners’ dilemma: By becoming well-rounded “jacks-of-all-trades,” they end up sacrificing any claim to expertise. Planners opposing a freeway in St. Paul, Minnesota, found they were no match for engineers. The planners relied on messy value judgments and had no means of backing their claims, in contrast to the engineers who had straightforward, if simplistic, standards to cite. Altshuler had identified an important political variable: clarity of standards. Politicians were swayed by the simplicity that engineers offered, and so too was the public. This dilemma for planners is particularly acute in transportation, where alternatives are shaped by complex analytical techniques and decisions are dominated by engineers who minimize political conflict by confining issues to narrow technical bounds (Altshuler et al., 1979; Barrett & Rose, 1999; Black, 1990).

The BRU case suggests a way around the planners’ dilemma: Use a diverse set of methods drawn from a broad array of expertise. Instead of pitting planners toe-to-toe with engineering standards, the BRU countered government plans using methods from a variety of sources and credentials: Volunteers stood at bus stops to count overcrowding, riders provided personal testimony at public hearings, organizers collected declarations from riders, allies wrote legal documents, a prac-

ticing planner taught transportation analysis to movement leaders, a scholar publicly refuted official plans, and other scholars wrote supportive reports and served as expert witnesses in court.

### ***Foster Local Political Communities through Participation***

Transportation bureaucracies that were once practically closed to outsiders now routinely mandate citizen participation, thanks in part to legislative changes such as ISTEA. But what *kind* of participation? Arnstein (1969) defined participation in terms of the amount of control that citizens have over public decisions. She envisioned citizen participation as a ladder, with rungs symbolizing different styles and levels of involvement. Thus, when government adopts a style, it confers a certain level of power on citizens: At the bottom of the ladder is a phony process that actually manipulates the public, among the middle rungs are short-sighted efforts to placate expected objections, and near the top is the more-inspired but risky genuine partnership. The BRU wanted a different kind of participation than current laws and regulations called for, one that politicizes people rather than merely gets public buy-in.

The BRU case illustrates the immature condition of most public participation in transportation planning.<sup>9</sup> ISTEA mandates citizen participation but offers little guidance to local officials, resulting in uneven application nationwide (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1996b). Local agencies experience internal conflict over the value of participation, with some planners viewing it as a “necessary evil,” others as a chance to get “feedback,” and still others who seek true collaboration (Innes & Gruber, 1999). Since 1991, ISTEA has offered some help for advocacy groups by making information available to the public earlier than in the past (Dittmar, 1995). But most public comment periods still take place during the project development phase, after important decisions have been made.

Furthermore, bureaucracies maintain stability by “routinizing” citizen participation. Fearing that plans will be held back by time-consuming conflicts among competing interests, government officials who invite wider involvement in public decisions often channel this new participation through restrictive bureaucratic procedures (Howard et al., 1994). Therefore, what is gained in institutional access is constrained by the *manner* of participation that government accepts. For example, ISTEA required that BRU members be permitted to attend more public hearings than they would have in the past, but they were restricted to limited avenues of expression that regulations dictated, such as filling out comment cards or speaking in turn at a microphone for

only 2 minutes. A major problem with routinized citizen participation is that it exhibits “the same skew toward better-educated and higher-income groups as electoral politics” (Howard et al., 1994, p. 189).

BRU leaders, by contrast, appear to view participation as a means of developing a civic consciousness, as a way to “raise peoples’ expectations” (LCSC, 1998, sec. III, para. 6). The BRU insists on training organizers to critically understand social injustice (R. Burgos, personal communication, April 30, 1998). Mobilizing a mass base reoriented the goal of participation toward changing the participants themselves (Clavel, 1986; Frug, 1980). This orientation helps participants feel connected to a whole, that their contributions produce things of lasting value, and that their lives take on a richer meaning (Evans & Boyte, 1986).

## Conclusion: Lessons for Community-Based Planning

This article may give the mistaken impression that the MTA was nothing but the scoundrel of the story. But the success of a social movement is influenced by the relative openness of government policies (Eisinger, 1973; Putnam, 1994), and the MTA probably took pains to invite more spirited debate than most transportation agencies. A fuller understanding of how community-based planners can successfully challenge plans would also require learning how much credit should go to the MTA. But this study focused instead on the steps citizen activists took to contest government plans. BRU leaders used their own internal resources to carry the movement forward: They were good at organizing people and framing issues. But the BRU’s most important skill may have been in strategically timing their actions and aiming at targets in ways that exploited available opportunities, a skill that goes beyond just good internal organizing.

This case demonstrates a link between politics and planning by showing the obstacles and opportunities that community-based planners are likely to face when they act politically. Planning-related techniques helped community leaders seize key opportunities. The BRU designed a methodology to counter government claims, primarily by putting accessible techniques into the hands of grassroots volunteers. An array of methods helped shift the political opportunity structure in several ways. The BRU’s detailed documentation was cited by the judge as a key reason for handing down the injunction that enjoined the MTA from raising the bus fare (Kelley, 1996; R. Burgos, personal communication, April 30, 1998). Counts of overcrowding and testimonies of hardship on the buses exposed weaknesses in the MTA that reduced the risk for allies to join the cause.

And allies, equipped with technical expertise, caused instability in political alignments by publicly countering MTA claims and exposing false assumptions.

The BRU also mobilized citizen participation, causing government officials to change the way they conceptualized the provision of transit services. According to a federal court, the MTA fell short in its duty to ensure that its policies avoid discriminatory effects. Whether or not MTA leaders were aware that their policies disadvantaged poor bus riders, it took citizen participants to get the agency on track. Large bureaucracies are poorly equipped to operate outside the boundaries of time-worn, rigid operating procedures. The BRU movement represents a new kind of participation, one that acts as a constructive complement to government, helping government-based planners and policymakers see what rigid bureaucracies are not set up to let them readily see.

However, the case also suggests that even though a social movement can be a viable route toward achieving more equitable outcomes in planning, the BRU’s success resulted partly because Los Angeles was a place of unusually favorable local political opportunities. The finding that success was determined in part by unusual local conditions may be discouraging for activists seeking change, because it means that the BRU model may be difficult to export to other cities. But other findings are more encouraging. This case suggests that if activists attempt to replicate the Los Angeles model elsewhere, they are more likely to seize their own local opportunities if they have access to skills from the field of planning. Planners possess skills that can help activists recognize and seize opportunities, if they are willing to act politically and work at the grassroots level as a contentious but constructive counterbalance to government planning. In Los Angeles, activists and planners were doing just this sort of contentious planning when their decisions and actions fostered the decisive events that propelled the BRU movement forward. Community-based planners elsewhere should consider such steps if they aim to challenge and complement government plans.

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## NOTES

1. Among the most prominent leaders who wrote or spoke publicly for the BRU during the early 1990s are Executive Director Eric Mann, Della Bonner, Rita Burgos, Martín Hernandez, Chris Mathis, and Kikanza Ramsey.
2. Title VI prohibits recipients of federal funds from engaging in intentional discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin, and it prohibits unjustified adverse disparate impact discrimination for which there are less discriminatory alternatives (Burrington & Heart, 1998).
3. The Southern California Regional Rail Authority, not the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), operates Metrolink. However, the two agencies share board members, and the MTA has provided more than 60% of operating funds for Metrolink since the early 1990s (NAACP Legal Defense Fund, 1996a, p. 87).
4. Other parties to the suit included the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and four private citizens.
5. In 1990, Los Angeles' suburbs were 57% minority (other than non-Hispanic White) compared to 23% nationwide (suburbs considered to be Los Angeles-Long Beach PMSA minus central-city population), based on calculations by the author (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). In 1990, segregation in terms of the Dissimilarity Index, White to Black, was 73.6, where 60 and above is considered very high (Lewis Mumford Center, 2001).
6. The numbers include all articles in a given year from the *Los Angeles Times* that allege inappropriate action by the transit agency: 5 in 1989, 10 in 1990, 11 in 1991, 24 in 1992, 14 in 1993, and 49 in 1994. Topics included scandals, misappropriation of funds, breakdowns of service, and fraud, waste, or abuse by agency personnel, consultants, contractors, or board members.
7. Examples include transit employee Marvin Holen and alternate MTA board member Antonio Villaraigosa who provided data and firsthand accounts of impending policy changes that threatened bus riders. Former transit administrator Tom Rubin offered analysis of government data, and transportation analyst Ryan Snyder volunteered technical expertise (Mann, 1996, 1997; R. Burgos, personal communication, April 30, 1998; Taylor & Garrett, 1998).
8. Rubin wrote reports critical of the rail projects while a financial administrator with the bus agency until the mid 1990s (e.g., see Rubin, 1993) and later served as a technical consultant for the BRU (Taylor & Garrett, 1998). Planning professors argued for distance-based fares, but the BRU favored flat fares (Taylor & Garrett, 1998). The BRU temporarily severed ties with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund after lawyers negotiated a reduced-price, low-income monthly bus pass that the BRU objected to because riders had to prove low-income status (Mann & Mathis, 1997).
9. Citizen participation is still viewed in narrow terms, often formulated merely to comply with requirements. A recent

journal dedicated to participation reflects this narrow view, stopping short of recognizing how participation can bring self-fulfillment to participants and strengthen democracy (Khisty & Leleur, 1997).

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