



## Mpact Podcast Episode 62 – December 2022

### Community-Centered Transit with Tamika Butler

Butler spoke at the closing plenary at the 2022 Rail~Volution conference in Miami, Florida.

#### **(8s): Tamar Shapiro**

Welcome to the Impact Podcast. This is Tamar Shapiro, CEO of Mpact, formerly known as Rail~Volution. We are excited to have recently announced both our new name and tagline: Mpact: Mobility, Community, Possibility. We're a national organization working at the intersection of transit, related mobility options and community development. The podcast is a chance to hear from a range of voices as we go deeper into how to leverage transit to make communities better for people.

#### **(44s): Jeff Wood**

Hey there. I'm Jeff Wood, principal of The Overhead Wire and your host. This month on the Mpact Podcast, we're going back to Miami for the closing conference plenary featuring the amazing Tamika Butler. Tamika discusses community centered transit, equity and thinking about who we're actually planning for. Stay with us.

#### **(1m 12s): Tamar Shapiro**

Tamika Butler is a national expert and speaker on issues related to the built environment, equity, anti-racism, diversity and inclusion. She is the principal and founder of Tamika I Butler Consulting, and has also previously held the roles of director of Equity inclusion at Tool Design, as well as executive director of the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust. Again, we are, we were thrilled that she accepted our invitation to be with us at this conference. Sorry that she cannot be here in person, but very grateful that she is still joining us. Tamika, welcome.

#### **(1m 53s): Tamika Butler**

Thanks so much for having me and making it work. It's a little meta right now. I can see myself twice, but hopefully this still translates. You're gonna see my slides most of the time as opposed to me, but I'll, I'll keep us on time so you can get to the great response panel. Thank you again, so much to, to the organization for putting together what I, I have seen on social media and

what I was looking forward to would be a great, great conference. Sorry that I cannot be there in person and I'm gonna try to, to make it through this whole thing without coughing or falling asleep, because that's what I've mostly been doing.

5 (2m 39s):

So I wanted to talk a little bit about community centered transit. I always like to start, if you've seen me speak before, a lot of the stuff you're gonna see is gonna be familiar. And I always tell people it's, it stays consistent because we still need to see change. And one of the ways in which we need to see change is the way that we not only acknowledge, but truly incorporate indigenous people into our work. Whenever you're thinking about community centered, anything we have to think about indigenous folks, especially when we're thinking about things like transportation and climate change. There's so many lessons to be learned from those who were the caretakers before many of us landed on this, this settled land.

5 (3m 26s):

And so I always encourage folks, especially and our, in our field, to really be thinking about this. And so, you know, who am I? I'm, I'm Tamika. I, I have my own consulting firm, TLB Consulting, and through my consulting firm, I work on a lot of things. I work with a variety of clients, whether or not it's counties or national organizations or organizations like Metrolink, where I help them do research and, and write reports. And I would say, you know, a lot of it is based on transportation and sustainability. I also do some, some freelance writing, and I work with a lot of emerging mobility clients and think about the way that technology can be harnessed for, for transportation.

5 (4m 13s):

Good. And then in my free time, I'm also on the board of Transit Center, which I also like to disclose cuz I, I use a lot of transit center stuff, but for folks who know me, they know I'm also getting a PhD. I'm in the second year of a PhD program at ucla. Let me tell you, when you're on a quarter system and there are only 10 weeks in a quarter, and you have Covid for two of 'em, the PhD is a little frightening. But my, my interest and the reason I wanted to get a PhD is to really focus on, on why and, and how people travel the relationship. Like how do we build environments spatially and think about race and poverty and transportation, and then what, what's going on with, with black geographies and neighborhoods for folks who are like, that's a lot of goodly group.

5 (5m 1s):

What does that mean? I always tell folks that all the work I do is centered and really rooting for everybody black. I just truly believe that when my folks get free, it's gonna uplift all of us. And so that's really how I center all my work. And so, you know, it's hard not to talk, it's hard to talk about transportation or transit or community without thinking about the summer of 2020, right? And this is a, an image that, that is seared in so many people's minds where, you know, someone is gasping for, for their last breath with, with a knee on their neck. And there was a lot of response in our industry to this moment of racial injustice to this public lynching, right?

5 (5m 47s):

And it didn't matter if you were a small town and you were dedicating park space, our territories, right? Us territories, places as far as Guam were protesting. There were new nonprofits created, universities were putting out statements, right? And all over transportation agencies. I think this, this is King County, I think this is supposed to, you know, represent that, that Black Lives Matter. And so everywhere you looked, essentially, right? As, as an industry, we were trying to respond to this, but also every, every sector, right?

5 (6m 28s):

I said universities there and, and Miami, right? We saw this happen all over the country police and trying to figure out, you know, what, what do we do? And so there, there was this moment where all of a sudden a lot of folks said, what would it look like to reimagine policing? And, and for a lot of, for a lot of us in, in our space, we have to think about what that would mean for transit. What does that mean for, for fair? And the fact that we know that in many places, black and brown folks will disproportionately get stopped for fair evasion, right? What does that mean for departments of transportation?

5 (7m 8s):

Do they take over traffic stops? What, what does that mean for workers? What does that mean for the workforce? Right? So the, these were things that on the local level everyone was talking about. And then we had a new secretary of transportation secretary Pete, and all of a sudden we started hearing things from the highest offices that many of us have been saying in our communities, highways are racist, right? That, that our built infrastructure is a way to stop mobility, right there, there's this theory and, and, and war that, that sometimes people try to mame the enemy, not kill them, mame them.

5 (7m 52s):

And it seems like it's more compassionate, but the reality is, it, it stops folks from being able to live their full lives. And, and something I always try to say is, the way we build infrastructure in this country is a form of maming. We might not completely kill folks, but the way our infrastructure is built is to make life hard to live. For some of us, I always say there is a reason we say the other side of the tracks, right? And so we, we've now seen this executive order that says that equity and underserved communities have to be front and center and all we do and are thinking about built environments, right?

5 (8m 35s):

And are thinking about environmental justice and are thinking about transportation. And so now, as, as agencies, as professionals, as consulting firms, as universities, right? We're all thinking about it. I wanna think, because that summer and that image really made us realize that we have to change. Like, that's what the goodness in my heart says. The cynical side of me says, well, now we realize that dollars are attached and because dollars are attached, we're gonna do things differently. But it's really hard to do things differently when we know that we're used to doing things a certain way.

5 (9m 15s):

So the, the example I always like to use is, during that same summer all over the country, a lot of departments of transportation started these slow streets programs, right? Where we would close our streets and try to get people out and be active. This is, this is my slow street in my neighborhood here in Los Angeles. And I think the program in Los Angeles was, was great. I, one of my, my mentors and friends is, is Selita. And she brought together community members and talked about how will this work? What do we do? How do we make sure this is equitable, right? But the reality is that didn't happen everywhere.

5 (9m 56s):

And so we had all these folks trying to do the right thing. Let's start sidewalk dining, let's start slow streets, let's make our communities like, let's get people outside and bring people back together. But we were still planning things in ways that centered the experience of able bodied, cisgendered white folks, right? We were engaging still in planning practices that despite our best intentions were centering whiteness. And, and we thought we were including the, you know, the every man experience and perspective in these things.

5 (10m 35s):

But we were really only thinking about how people experience place and space as they move through those places and spaces in white bodies. So we're telling people, if you can pay enough, you can be on this sidewalk in this dome that looks like a tent. But if you're on housed and you're on that same sidewalk in a tent, you deserve to be removed because we shouldn't have to see that, right? And the reality is that this was all happening at a time where for black folks, I don't know if I wanna be on a slow street. I know that a young man walking with Skittles, you know, on his street, I know a young man jogging in his neighborhood on a slow street, they lost their lives.

5 (11m 20s):

And so sometimes we plan things with the best intention, but we don't think about the fact that the way that those spaces are experienced diverge radically based on who you are in this country, right? And whenever I wanna talk about racism, I always have people say, well, I don't wanna talk about that. That doesn't sound fun. So fine. Let's, let's talk about transit, right? I know one of the exciting parts of of this conference is that, you know, there's a new name, right? Impact and really thinking about mobility and community and possibility, right?

5 (12m 3s):

And when I think about especially mobility and possibility, I think about the way that when we invest public dollars, right? Not only do we cut greenhouse admissions and create jobs, but we make transportation and we connect people. When we think about mobility, we can think about upward mobility, right? When, when public transportation stations are available and designed, again, not just for the able bodied, it can change lives. I don't do this work. I used to be a non-profit lawyer. I used to be a civil rights lawyer, and I came to transportation, I worked at a bike coalition, and I fell in love with this profession.

5 (12m 48s):

I fell in love with it so much. I'm getting a PhD. My wife doesn't understand why, and some days I don't. But the reality is that it's because I know that it is life changing. I know the way it can change lives, right? I also know the way that, as I said, we tie some strings to this equity. And when we give a little bit of money for public transportation funding, it's one of those win-wins that all government agencies love, right? And in my generation, the millennial generation, we've seen this like rebirth. We've seen people wanting to use public transportation, wanting to be in transit-oriented communities and really experience what that life is like when you don't have to have a car, right?

5 (13m 37s):

And when it is working, well, transportation is great, right? Transportation is the backbone to so many things. I always say to folks that it is, it is interconnected to so many things. It intersects, you know, I can't get to quality affordable healthcare if I can't get there. I can't get to education if I can't get there. And I always say that is intersecting. I had someone tell me the other day, it's not intersecting, it's interlocking, right? Because when transportation is going well, it's the center of the world, but people don't realize it because when it's seamless, it's great. But all of us who work in transportation knows that when it goes bad, that's when folks start to notice, right?

5 (14m 21s):

And so when we think about transit oriented communities, where we think about cities where it worked, when I think about places that use the pandemic and really saw some differences, I think about places like Paris, right? And when, when people do things right, you could say they make it hard to get around by car and they make it easier to get around by all of these other modes of transportation. But I feel like I'm speaking to the choir, you all know this, right? So does that make it community centered? And again, when I, when I stop just talking about all the good things, and I say, well, is this community centered? Is this centering anti-racist?

5 (15m 2s):

I get those looks like why do we have to talk about this? But I feel like at this organization, at this conference where we understand, and all those slides I just showed, we understand the promise of mobility. We understand the possibilities that mobility gives us to really impact lives. Like I said, game changing, right? We understand that that could happen, but only if that, that word in the center community is actually centered. And I said, I used to be an employment lawyer. I was an employment lawyer in San Francisco. I was a civil rights lawyer, and I focused on employment discrimination in black communities.

5 (15m 43s):

And so my main hub, the, the spot I spent most of my time was Bayview Hunter's Point. And that was right when SF Muni opened up a new line in Bayview Hunter's Point. But as I was doing law there, no one wanted to talk to me about law, some 20 something lawyer. They didn't know me. I wasn't from the community. So first they wanted to know what I thought about the T line, and they wanted to know what I thought about the T line, because folks didn't feel like it

was built for them. They didn't feel like the leadership of SF Muni was thinking about the black folks in Bayview. Hunter's Point, this part of the city that is geographically isolated and cut off folks in the community thought that it was a transit line specifically to get 49ers fans before the stadium, before Levi's was built in, in Santa Clara, they thought that it was just built to get football fans to the stadium, which was in Bayview Hunter's point, right?

5 (16m 45s):

And so that was, in their opinion, a failure of leadership. And again, this is an organization that understands the importance of leadership in our work. As I said, I'm on the board of, of Transit Center and Transit Center puts out this report regularly. We actually have a, an updated one and what really is impacting folks who use transit, right? And, and what we are constantly finding is things again that I'm guessing you all know housing costs. Can I live in a place where then I can also access transit? Phil Washington, who, who used to run LA Metro would always say that people might think in transportation that housing is in a transportation problem.

5 (17m 34s):

But as people can no longer afford housing and they're being forced to move further out and they have to get places, it becomes a transportation problem, right? So housing costs and displacement, those two things always come up. We also hear a lot about changing demographics of community. Transit oriented development is great, but who is that development for and who gets displaced? What are the changing demographics and race matters, right? We have to talk about race. And the other thing we have to understand is if leadership is important, when you're planning these things out and community members feel like no one talked to us, they feel like there's this con disconnect between who works at these organization and who rides.

5 (18m 20s):

Right? We know census numbers tell us that the majority of transit riders are women, people of color and low income folks, and often folks who really can check all of those boxes, right? But the demographics of transit agencies, employee doesn't match that, right? Transit agencies are huge employers Transit, you know, driver jobs used to be this venue to the middle class, right? But what we've seen is that the folks leading these organization are not women, right? Even though we know women ride transit, we know it's not folks of color.

5 (19m 1s):

And so we're making these decisions without the folks who are using our services. Something else Transit Center did was they tried to measure the disparities in public transportation across different demographic groups. They started off with just six major cities, and they did this between February and 2020 and 2021, right? And this was this time, as I've already highlighted, where so many of, of our most enduring inequities were really magnified both by Covid 19 and the constant taking of black lives, which we were all in our homes just watching, right?

5 (19m 46s):

And so in these six cities, Chicago, la, New York, Philly, the Bay Area in San Francisco and Washington, the 10, you know, they, they all rank in the top 10 of the largest transit centers in the United States by ridership. And, and, and the reality is, what was found is people of color are more likely to commute by transit than white people. But far more jobs are accessible by driving than transit. Right? Remember when I was talking about this new impact model? And one of them is mobility, and another is possibilities. The possibilities to have that upward mobility are expanded when you have a car because we found that transit center that the, it's just way easier.

5 (20m 34s):

In Los Angeles where I live, 17 times more jobs were available when you had a car, right? And we know nationwide, I said, I'm rooting for everybody. Black nationwide, black households are the group least likely to have access to a private motor vehicle. So when you're thinking about how we wanna impact people's lives, we have to think about how do we track equity, right? And we have to realize that in most of our cities, there are two tier public transit systems with one mode being more expensive. You know, think about an express bus or a commuter train or even rail in a lot of places and then buses, right?

5 (21m 20s):

And so white commuters are able to get to their jobs in the city center, and then they can be wisp back to their nice communities at the end of the day. But usually a bus which is less expensive and makes more stops, it's, it might be cheaper, but it's more costly in terms of time, reliability, and ease of use, right? And so when we think about how we build our communities, we cannot do this work without talking about race. We cannot be afraid to talk about race and not just externally. Too often people are like, I wanna do equity. And they get excited and they're like, I'm gonna do this outward facing equity work.

5 (22m 3s):

But they don't realize that we have to also do this work in our organizations. How do we advance black leaders? How do we acknowledge that no matter what field you're looking at, reputable sources like Harvard Business Review tell us that black folks are still less likely to advance. And it's not just black folks, right? Folks with disability, queer folks, folks who are religious minorities, women, right? Folks of color generally just to survive in the workforce. We gotta figure out the ways that white folks work. And then we have to figure out how do we maintain in these organizations that still stay white?

5 (22m 44s):

How do we acknowledge that organizational segregation is still persistent? That in many of our transportation systems, the folks at the top look very different than the folks driving the bus, right? And that many of us who get involved in the space feel like to succeed, we have to make ourselves invisible. We have to minimize ourselves, right? And that has to change. I started off by talking about the summer of 2020, and my hope is that during that summer, we learned a lot, most importantly, how to listen to our communities, right? How to understand that we can't just talk about climate or transportation or housing for the people we wanna serve.

5 (23m 30s):

These struggles are intrinsically tied together. We don't lead single issue lives, right? My hope is that we've learned that engagement just going out there and saying, Hey, this is what we're gonna do, right? That's outreach. That's not engagement. Engagement is being willing to engage in that back and forth to question tenets of white supremacy, like a false sense of urgency or fear are needing to be perfect and think that there's only one right way to do thing. Or thinking that that progress is when things are bigger and there's more quantity over quality, right?

5 (24m 11s):

Are that we have to have this right to comfort, that we can't have conflict, that we have to hoard power and that we can only believe in things if it's written down, right? Instead of just listening. And again, if you've heard me speak, you've heard me say that grandmother who's peeking out of her blinds, those teenagers hanging out on the stoop or the corner, they can tell you everything you need to know about a community and how it's changing, right? And, and so we have to start thinking about our community as our partners. We have to be able to understand that strong community partnerships are key.

5 (24m 54s):

We're no longer in a world in which there can be no community partnerships. We have to have strong community partnerships. And when we have strong community partnerships, it doesn't help if we have these strong community partnerships. And then behind the scenes are our teams and our departments and and our organization and our consultant. We're not all on the same page, right? Because no community member wants to come to a meeting and say, wasn't I just at a meeting? And you're like, oh, well that was the housing team. That wasn't the transportation team. And so all partnership is not equal. We need partnership with community that is strong, that treats those community members as the experts that they are and hopefully pays them.

5 (25m 35s):

But we also have to have our stuff together behind the scenes. And then we have to ask ourselves what we can do, right? First we have to realize, I said, one of the tenets of white supremacy is this desire to feel safe, right? And that's what we all want. I say we have to talk about race when we do this work, but talking about race is often scary for people because we wanna be safe, we wanna safe space. And what people mean when they say they wanna feel safe is that they are scared. They have this fear. That's what they're not saying, that it's hard to do this work and center community and center race because we don't know what will happen all the time when we do that.

5 (26m 20s):

And that's scary and even scarier than not knowing what can happen is this fear we have of being called racist. We don't wanna say the wrong thing. We don't want people to think these things about us because oftentimes we're like, we're doing, we're doing good work. We're



public servants, we're out here trying to make things better. We can't be racist, right? But the reality is, we have to get out of this desire to be in a safe space, right? We have to have courage. We have to get beyond being safe. And we have to get to the space where we're brave enough to know that we don't have to see somebody gasping for their last breath to center race, to do the right thing, to fight for equity.

5 (27m 9s):

We have to have that courage. And you know what? We're gonna mess up. We are absolutely gonna mess up when we try to do this work, but even though we're gonna mess up, and even though when we mess up, we are gonna feel horrible, right? It, it doesn't feel good to mess up. But that doesn't mean we don't do it. We still gotta take that leap to do things differently, to listen to community. And when we do get it wrong, we just gotta say, well, look, I took the leap, but I'm gonna, I'm gonna shake it off and I'm gonna keep going. I'm gonna reflect on what I did that was wrong.

5 (27m 52s):

I'm gonna atone and say sorry. And then we're really gonna stay committed to this work. We're really gonna stay committed to doing things differently. And everyone likes to talk about equity, right? Everyone likes to say, I wanna do equity work. But in order to do equity work, you can't talk about equity without talking about power. You can't talk about equity without talking about privilege. You have to be committed to really creating these spaces that, again, are not just safe spaces, but brave spaces where folks you're working with, whether they're community members or colleagues, feel like they can be brave enough to get it wrong.

5 (28m 38s):

That there's gonna be space and grace to move forward from those mistakes. And then, like I said, we can't talk about equity without talking about power. And an easy way to think about power is whenever you're making a decision, whether or not it's a program, a policy, a new route, whatever it is, you have to ask yourself who is going to be most impacted by this decision? And that could be a good impact, it could be a bad impact, but who's gonna be most impacted? And when you say to yourself, who's gonna be most impacted? Then look around at that decision making table and are those folks there?

5 (29m 19s):

And if those folks aren't there, you have a power imbalance. And when you have that power imbalance, you can't have equity, no matter how much you wanna say. But we are focused on equity. If you look around that decision making table and you don't realize that maybe that's the wrong table, then you have to say, well, why? You have to analyze and challenge the privilege. Who's privileged enough to get into this room? Do they have to be able to come in the middle of the day? Do they have to be able to get paid to do this work? Did they have to have the transportation options? Did they have to have a fancy degree? Right? These are the things that we have to do.

5 (30m 2s):

And I've been ending my talks lately with, with this book written, written by a professor at a Georgetown, got his PhD here at ucla, and is a philosophy professor at a great Jesuit institution as a product of, of Jesuit education. Georgetown, right? And in this book, [Reconsidering Reparations] Olúfémi O. Táiwò is talking about reparations, right? Something that I think for a lot of us, we started to think about and, and how do you think about reparations in a country that was built on stealing land from indigenous people and then building up our land and our wealth on the backs of enslaved folks, on the backs of, of Asian world, world workers, right?

5 (30m 50s):

Like how, how do we think about reparations? And what Olúfémi O. Táiwò does in this book is he says, think about it. And the scale of something that is global, and not just global, but he really uses climate change and resiliency. Things that are important now more than ever, especially in places like Miami, right? He says, when you think about climate, and when you think about reparation, we have to acknowledge that many of us have ancestors that were harmed by what he calls the global racial empire. But you know what? Many of us also have ancestors that help that empire thrive. And so as a result, we can't look at reparations through fault.

5 (31m 33s):

We can't look at reparations saying, well, your ancestors were slave owners. You're bad. You're at fault. Instead, we have to understand liability and the distribution and accumulation of advantages and disadvantages over time and space. So think about that for a moment. When I think about transportation, when I think about community building, when I think about transit-oriented development, that is an exercise where I can very concretely think about the distribution and accumulation of advantages and disadvantages over both time and space. And then fme also asks us to take a minute to think about our ancestors and the type of ancestor we wanna be.

5 (32m 17s):

When I think about my work, I, I've already said, my work is about rooting for everybody black, helping black communities. My work is about urban planning. My work is about centering black women, right? All of these things. But the global racial empire wasn't built overnight. And so I don't have to change planning overnight. I don't have to change transit overnight. I have to figure out at my organization, at my agency, at my university, right? Whoever you are in the seat you're sitting in right now, finishing up your lunch, you have to ask yourself, what is my work? And how do I stay in this fight for social justice?

5 (33m 0s):

How do I keep fighting injustice and inequities? And how do we give ourselves permission to know that we don't have to do all of this work on our own, but just like our ancestors, my ancestors, I have to advance it a little bit. I have to figure out what is gonna be my role and making sure that I fight for centering community and making change. Thank

1 (33m 56s): **Tamar Shapiro**

Thanks for listening. Find out more about our work by visiting our website, [Mpactmobility.org](https://mpactmobility.org). That's M as in mobility, and pact as in agreement, dot org. [Mpactmobility.org](https://mpactmobility.org).