My name is Susie Byrd, I’m a City Council representative in El Paso, Texas.

What you would notice when you first got to El Paso is it’s in a desert. But in the center is the largest urban park in the country. It’s a, I think, 34-thousand acre mountain, the Franklin Mountain Park, and it divides the city. It’s really, really remarkable. The other thing that you would want to know about El Paso is that it shares a border with Juarez, Mexico. It’s our sister city and we’re very much linked economically, culturally, we’re just one kind of region or city or community with a big giant line in the middle of us. And all of those pieces of, you know, the big mountain running through the center of us and the dividing line between Juarez and El Paso make for very interesting planning and sort of how you do transit and all sorts of things.

In terms of planning, what makes it kind of interesting - particularly for transportation planning - is that you’re always constrained. So the mountain is always a constraint, the border is always a constraint. And so things that you might do if those things didn’t exist you can’t do because they do exist.

But there’s great opportunities. For example, one thing that we’ve been thinking about a lot in our community we used to have a very robust streetcar system, probably one of the most robust in the country. And one of the most important links for that was the Juarez/El Paso link. So you had a trolley that would go back and forth every day and all the time. And millions and millions of people that’s how they crossed. Unfortunately it got pulled up in a crazy political battle, as many of those things were. And so we’re hoping to keep going with many of those links. We now have International Transit. Sort of the next step we’re eyeing is a streetcar transit between the two communities.

We asked people what they were doing currently. And from that survey, they said 91% of all their trips were by car. But then we asked them what would you prefer to do, and we asked them what would you prefer to do even if gas stayed the same price, and even if congestion stayed exactly the way it is. So just if you were to do it today, what would be your preference? And actually the preference showed that many, many more people would be willing to ride the bus, would be willing to bike, would be willing to walk, if they had those choices in their neighborhood. And so what I took from that, really, is that we aren’t building a transportation network that really mirrors commuter demand. Or we’re trying to build that but I think more and more we should saying, here’s what commuters want; how are we spending our transportation dollars and does that mirror commuter demand? So, for example, if we built what commuters wanted or what they said was their stated preference, there would only be 61% of trips taken by car instead of what they are currently which is 91%.

I think the way I’ve always understood smart growth or where I come back to is when I just think about my neighborhood and the neighborhood that I grew up in. So in my neighborhood I have a lot of choices. I have the choice to walk my kids to school, or have my kids walk to school because
we’ve got schools right by. We’ve got a neighborhood park a block away, we’ve got a big regional park three or four blocks away. We’ve got a park and a library and the House of Pizza and the best tamales in town all within walking distance. We really have a lot of choice in terms of the way we get where we want to go. So we can take the bus or we can ride a bike or walk or we can get in the car. And all of those options are safe options, which I think is really important and I think that’s kind of what’s been missing in a lot of the new development in our community. The other thing that I think is really important, and I often forget to mention but it’s really important to who I am as a person and the values that I appreciate, is my neighborhood has always been a neighborhood where everybody’s a part of it. And so I grew up in a modest home, moved next door, me and my family, to a little bit bigger home on a bigger lot. Right around the corner is a mansion and a duplex and small apartment complexes. And we all fit in the same neighborhood and we all participate in the same neighborhood and the way that it’s built makes it so that nobody feels excluded, regardless of whether, you know, you’re on a modest income or you’ve got a couple more bucks in the bank than everyone else. And so that to me is always been something that’s been very important about what I believe community to be, which is where everybody fits and participates and belongs and feels good about their community and nobody’s excluded. And neighborhoods like that, that were built like that, do that by design.