

RURAL COMMUNITIES NEED BETTER TRANSPORTATION POLICY

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Downtown Baker City, Oregon. Photo by Baker County Tourism.

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Many federal policymakers mistakenly believe that living in a rural area inevitably means that every single person must drive long distances for every trip—and that the cost, time, inconvenience, and pollution from long trips behind the wheel are a non-negotiable part of rural life. That is out of touch with the reality in rural America, **where more than 1 million households don't even have access to a vehicle.**¹

As the case studies in this report show, many towns in rural areas are demonstrating that it is possible to provide residents with a choice to drive less and enhance their quality of life, without losing their rural essence. These and other municipalities are reinvesting in their historic downtowns to attract economic activity, making it easier to live near work and shopping in the process. They are transforming main streets to make them vibrant, walkable, community centers. They are investing in specialized rural transit services to provide better access to work and services. They are improving broadband to allow residents to access some of those services without leaving the house and attract new businesses and workers.

However, many of these communities are swimming against the current of federal transportation policy that makes it hard to invest in safe infrastructure for getting around outside a car in town centers and provides insufficient funding for rural transit operations. Instead of prioritizing the repair of vital road or bridge connections, current federal transportation policy incentivizes new highway investments that draw development away from those historic downtown economic centers, undercutting local revitalization efforts.

Congress's bipartisan infrastructure bill preserves many of these obstacles, but there are still plenty of opportunities to make it easier for rural communities to revitalize their downtowns and provide better transportation options, especially in how the Biden administration chooses to implement the bill moving forward. Federal decision-makers shouldn't tune out for five years until the next big transportation bill once this bill is settled—they should work to make this transportation policy work better for rural communities.

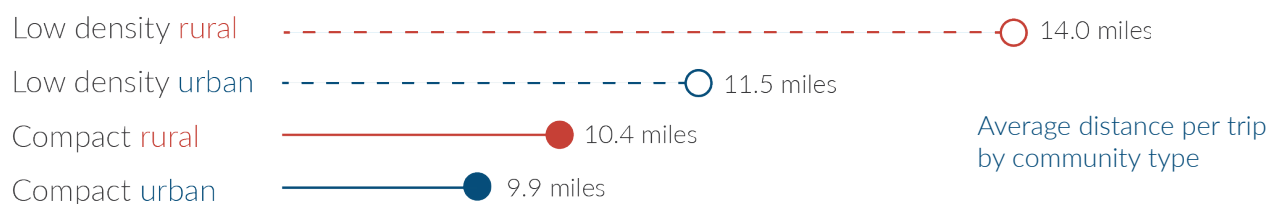
Driving further, accomplishing less

While rural and urban areas certainly have their differences, new research from Transportation for America and Third Way finds that households in rural areas and urban areas alike are driving significantly farther per trip on average as of 2017 than they were in 2001 to accomplish their commutes and daily tasks, 12 percent and 10 percent farther respectively.

Trips to work in particular have grown significantly farther in both urban and rural areas, by 15 percent and 16 percent respectively.



However, households closer to town, village, and urban centers in both rural and urban areas have much shorter daily trips than households located further from concentrated development. Long car trips aren't actually a part of daily life for all rural residents. In fact, households in lower-density outer suburbs of major metropolitan regions travel farther per trip on average than rural households located near town centers.



These trends pose particular burdens on rural communities

While these trends look similar across rural and urban areas, longer trips have the potential to pose much greater burdens on rural Americans, negatively impacting their economic opportunities, quality of life, and healthcare access. Many rural communities today are heavily reliant on one or a handful of large employers and medical facilities serving a large share of the dispersed population. If any of those employers and institutions consolidate, close, or relocate farther from housing—and more than 130 rural hospitals (7 percent) have already closed since 2010—residents may not have comparable options, forcing them to take longer and more costly trips at best or lose access to that work or service altogether.²

Limited transportation access is compounded by poor internet access in many rural communities, especially in dispersed rural areas where providing that infrastructure is cost-inefficient and private internet providers have little incentive to do so. While 97 percent of Americans in urban areas have access to high-speed fixed service, that number falls to 65 percent in rural areas, and barely 60 percent have access on Tribal lands.³ In addition to limiting economic opportunity and mobility in rural America, this poor broadband access has transportation impacts, requiring long trips in some cases to accomplish work and activities that could otherwise be done online.

Rural areas also have a higher share of their population aged 65 and over, and a lack of other transportation options can leave them stranded. A 2004 study found that older adults who no longer drive make one percent fewer trips to the doctor, 59 percent fewer trips to shop or eat out, and 65 percent fewer trips to visit friends and family, than drivers of the same age.⁴

What role should rural communities play in reducing transportation emissions?

Transportation accounts for the largest share of emissions in the US and a full transition to electric vehicles is still decades away. We will never meet urgent climate change goals unless we make it possible for Americans to drive less to reach jobs and other essentials.⁵

Rural America is not responsible for a major share of transportation emissions from personal vehicles. Despite driving nearly 40 percent more annually per household on average, rural areas contribute a significantly lower share of emissions from transportation overall than urban areas due to their much lower (and shrinking) population.^{6,7} Rural America simply shouldn't be the primary target of strategies to reduce emissions from personal vehicles.

However, rural areas can still see significant benefits from getting alternatives to driving (and emitting) less.

Policymakers representing rural areas have a clear interest in finding ways to both encourage shorter trips to save time and money, reduce emissions, and serve the millions of rural residents who either don't have access to a vehicle or choose to get around in other ways.

Rural communities are improving transportation access and jumpstarting their economies by revitalizing their historic town centers, *but they need help from federal policymakers*

Few people would choose to drive farther than they did a decade ago for the same basic trips, all other circumstances equal, but development patterns are making it a necessity in much of the country. However, a number of rural communities are reinvesting in their historic downtowns to improve their economic vitality, providing their residents with better access to jobs and services in the process. Many rural communities have thriving main streets, and others have main streets with significant unrealized economic potential. The case studies at the end of this report show communities expanding transit service, improving broadband access, encouraging housing and businesses to locate in their historic town centers, and making those downtowns more walkable—ultimately making their economies more resilient and allowing more people to live where they can take shorter trips.

Yet current federal transportation policy works at odds with many rural communities' downtown revitalization efforts. Rural areas are sometimes disparagingly referred to as “flyover country,” but our federal transportation program treats rural America as “drive-through” country. Federal transportation policy and funding programs heavily favor new highway and interchange construction, and while these infrastructure projects can make it easier and faster for people and freight to travel through rural regions, they often do little to support the existing town centers, downtowns, and main streets that are the local economic powerhouse in even the most rural areas. While touted as economic drivers these investments often simply move existing economic activity around within the larger region, making it difficult to determine their true net benefit.⁸ In the process, they draw development, shopping, and major employers out where land is cheaper, requiring longer trips, costing everyone more money. **We need a federal transportation program that supports the revitalization of historic town centers instead of encouraging their hollowing-out and decline.**

Downtown Erwin, TN. Photo by Brian Stansberry via Wikimedia.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Invest heavily in transit in rural areas

It looks different in rural areas, but transit is already essential for many families and older residents with no other means to reach healthcare, groceries, and other crucial services. A number of rural communities have expanded transit service to meet that need and seen significant benefits (see the Paris, TX and Burlington, NC case studies for examples). However, around 30 percent of rural areas have no access to transit service at all, let alone the quality of service that would allow them to rely on it regularly.⁹ Many rural transit providers currently operate on shoestring budgets, highly vulnerable to circumstances like dwindling local tax revenues in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is time for the federal government to invest in building out our national transit network like it invested in building out the interstate system, and rural communities should be key beneficiaries of those investments. The original bipartisan infrastructure framework announced in June called for \$49 billion for transit, but transit was the only part of the plan that took a cut from that original proposal, down to \$39 billion. Much of the argument behind this cut came from members of the Senate claiming that rural residents don't use transit, ignoring those who do and those who can't because the transit is too poorly funded or non-existent.

Though some negotiators have warned against “double-dipping”—revisiting any programs in the budget reconciliation bill that were already funded through the bipartisan deal—Congressional Democrats should consider restoring this \$10 billion for transit that was cut from the framework as they put together the reconciliation package. Rural residents deserve the same ability to reach necessities whether they are mobility impaired, unable to afford a car, too young to drive, or prefer not to.

We need a greater investment in rural transit to make the transformative changes required, but in the absence of that, United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) still has a meaningful opportunity to rethink what providing transit in rural America should look like. Our current national rural transit program largely functions as an urban transit program applied to rural areas, and can be less effective as a result. Small rural transit providers should be given the tools and technical support needed to design their transit systems to meet residents' needs as directly and cost-effectively as possible—needs which can vary significantly across rural communities. That could mean assistance to determine exactly where and when people are traveling to and from to help rural agencies tailor their services, clear guidance about rural transit strategies and outcomes to measure, or a reduction in red tape to apply for funding.



Bus route in Canby, OR. Photo by City of Canby.

2. Prioritize the projects that improve access and reduce trip lengths

Driving further each year is not a measure of economic or transportation success. State and regional recipients of federal funds should be required to measure and improve how efficiently their transportation system connects people traveling to jobs and services, whether they are driving, taking transit, walking or biking. This would be a groundbreaking change to how we currently spend funds that would have far-reaching impacts for rural economic centers. Providing access is the fundamental purpose of transportation, yet we have traditionally evaluated the success of our transportation system based on whether vehicles can travel quickly in freeflow conditions, a poor substitute for true access. Today we have the data and tools necessary to go beyond measuring travel speed and analyze access. Instead of incentivizing new highway and interchange construction by default, this approach would prioritize transportation projects that help more people access work, services, and shopping in existing activity centers near housing.

Even without any actions from Congress, USDOT has an opportunity to use its competitive funding programs to improve non-driving access in rural areas. USDOT should structure the selection criteria for those programs to prioritize investing in rural town centers and efficiently connecting people in rural areas to jobs and services, whether by driving, transit, biking, or walking.

3. Prioritize safety for everyone in developed areas like town centers

Current federal standards for roadway design and operations emphasize vehicle speed and achieving free-flow conditions, which directly contributes to dangerous conditions for people walking or traveling actively outside of a car. For rural areas, where town main streets also often function as state highways with significant through-traffic, prioritizing speed over safety can make the difference between a vital, thriving economic hub and an empty downtown where no one wants to stop, walk, or do business. (See the Hillsboro, VA case study for a specific example.)

How the Biden administration implements the bipartisan infrastructure deal could make it significantly easier for rural localities to prioritize safety. One way would be revising outdated manuals used by transportation agencies to design streets, including in the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD), and reframing them and removing standards and guidance that lead to streets that are hostile to or dangerous for those outside of a vehicle.

4. Prioritize maintaining rural highways over expanding them

While communities of all kinds are facing deteriorating infrastructure, rural areas are especially vulnerable to the impacts. When a bridge in an urban or suburban area closes for major repairs, it creates a hassle for the people who use it. When a bridge in a rural area closes for repairs, it can reroute residents on lengthy, costly, time-consuming detours, preventing them from accessing healthcare, making already long work commutes longer, and even preventing emergency services from reaching residents quickly. In some states, this problem has become severe—in Mississippi, for example, as of 2018 more than 540 bridges in the state had been closed due to their conditions. In some counties in the state, as many as 30 bridges were shut down, rerouting residents on 40- to 50-mile detours.¹⁰

Despite a clear need to prioritize repair, many states are failing to make the investments required to stop roads and bridges from deteriorating in rural areas because they are still spending a sizable share of funds expanding and building new highways.¹¹ While the bipartisan infrastructure bill did not address this, the Biden administration can help improve access in rural areas by revealing which states are keeping up with maintenance needs before investing in new road infrastructure and by using their competitive funds to reward those that do.

Additionally, USDOT could provide better direction on accurately defining the beneficiaries of transportation projects. Currently, most transportation agencies assume that a project that goes through or near a community will benefit its residents, but that isn't necessarily the case. Highways built in rural areas are sometimes meant to help people from elsewhere travel through without stopping. Providing a more accurate approach to defining project beneficiaries will help clarify what rural needs are being addressed and what needs remain.

5. Connect rural communities by making a sizeable investment in better broadband access

Access to high-speed broadband is necessary to be able to participate in the 21st century economy. While some rural communities have been able to expand broadband access through local initiatives (see the Erwin, TN case study for an example), many, like Millinocket, ME, need support from the federal government to fund a large-scale investment in broadband to give their residents a fair shot at the economic opportunities that come with it—from remote work, to telehealth, to more equitable learning opportunities. Better broadband access also has transportation impacts, making some trips unnecessary while expanding opportunity in rural America. This has the potential to have much greater access benefits per dollar than any high cost transportation project.

Congress provided critical but temporary support to help vulnerable Americans afford broadband service during the pandemic. It is time for a long-term investment that helps low-income families in small town centers afford broadband access, and the infrastructure bill fortunately takes a significant step in meeting that need. It includes \$40 billion in funding to deploy broadband to unserved areas and continues the existing program to help low-income families access service.

6. Recalibrate federal agency policies and grant programs to better support rural town centers

Many rural communities depend heavily on grant programs from the US Department of Agriculture, General Services Administration, Economic Development Administration, Department of Housing and Urban Development, and other agencies to support their economic development. These programs should be structured to encourage and incentivize investment in the historic town centers where the impacts are amplified. These agencies should also adopt policies to locate government facilities in or adjacent to downtowns. That means recognizing and incorporating multimodal access and agglomeration benefits into their grantmaking decisions and guidance as well as fully calculating the associated and long-term maintenance cost of greenfield or remote development.

Downtown Oxford, MS. Photo by Daman Entwistle via Flickr.



CASE STUDIES

Rural communities working to catalyze economic growth and improve access for residents

Paris, TX improves transit access

Paris is a town of 25,000 people located in northeastern Texas along the border of Oklahoma. It is part of a 10 county area serviced by the Ark-Tex Council of Governments Rural Transit District (TRAX) which only operated an on-demand service requiring reservations up until 2016. Though the on-demand service was critical for residents who used it, the advanced notice required, limited availability of rides and small fleets were all major limitations.

In response, Paris and other local partners supported TRAX to launch a fixed route bus service, Paris Metro, in 2016. The service, which includes four routes in Paris running hourly between 6:30 a.m. and 6:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, has filled a critical need in allowing residents to access jobs and social services.

Paris' service relies on a combination of public and private partners, as well as federal funds that have played a critical role in bringing Paris' service to fruition in the low-income counties it serves. Additional federal transit funding would help Paris expand this successful network to meet the needs of residents who work at night or on weekends.

Bus routes in Paris, TX



“The impact of our bus system has exceeded all expectations when it comes to the impact on the local business community. I see people getting off the bus downtown to shop, visit our bank branches, and access medical care.”¹²

Greg Wilson, Executive Board of the Lamar County Chamber of Commerce and President of Lamar National Bank



Downtown Paris, TX. Photo by City of Paris

Burlington, NC invests in rural transit to improve job and business access

Burlington, NC is located roughly halfway between Greensboro and Durham/Chapel Hill just north of Interstate 85, with a population of about 50,000. Up until 2016, the growing area had only a countywide, on-demand shuttle service operated by Alamance County Transit Authority (ACTA) and no fixed-route transit service at all. As the town and region grew, increasing transportation options to provide better access to jobs and opportunity became critical.

To address that gap, in June 2016, LinkTransit began serving Burlington and other nearby communities. The service includes five color-coded routes connecting in the center of Burlington and extending to neighboring Graham and Gibsonville. Businesses quickly started advertising “on the green route” or “on the purple route,” and the new bus service became a major factor in the decision of a 5,000 employee company, PRA Group, to open a call center in Burlington in 2017. Burlington residents who couldn’t afford a car spoke with the local media shortly after the service launched about how important the new transit service was for reaching their jobs reliably.

Though the service initially only operated from 5:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, residents quickly began requesting greater frequency, new stops, and expanded hours to meet non-traditional commute schedules, and today Burlington’s service operates until 8:00 p.m. Additional transit funding would help the region continue to expand service to meet demand.¹³

“We had a lot of folks who had never been from one side of the community to the other. They hadn’t been to the new retail development because they didn’t have transportation—nor could they get a job in that area because they didn’t have transportation.”

Mike Nunn, Burlington’s Transportation Director



Downtown Burlington, NC. Photo by Aimee Tucker.

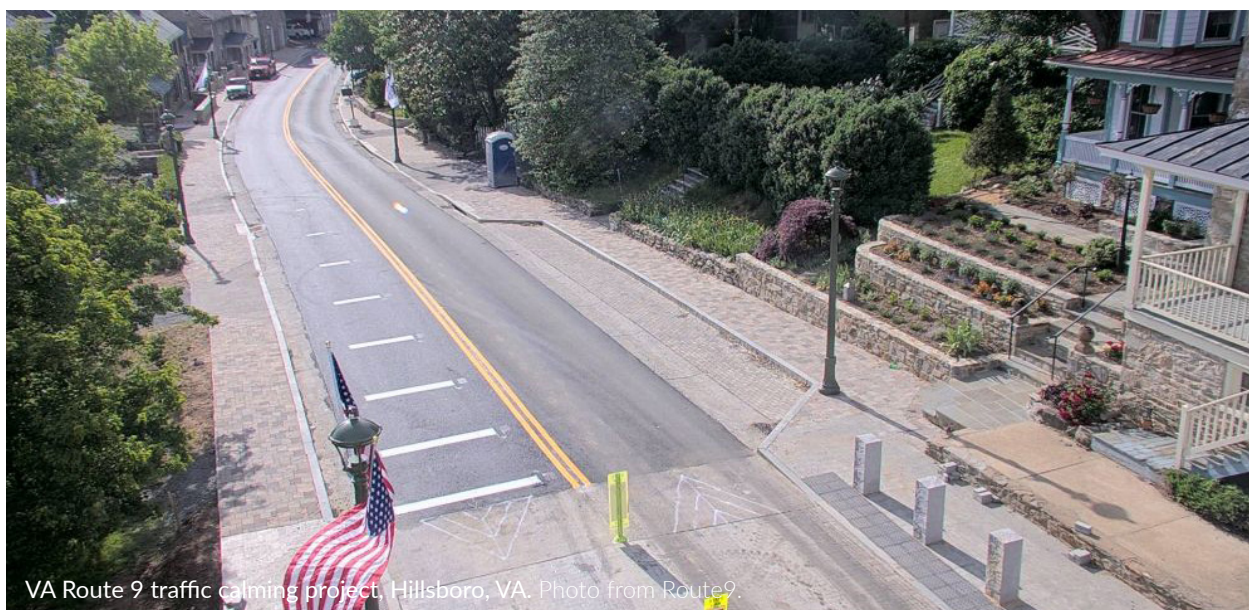
Hillsboro, VA improves a state highway main street to lower speeds and help create economic value

Hillsboro, VA, a historic small town of less than 200 people located halfway between Leesburg, VA and Charles Town, WV is like a lot of very small country towns. A state highway (VA Route 9) also serves as the town’s main street, running right through the middle of the rural town’s 50+ parcels facing the street. The speed limit west and east of the town is 45 mph, and although the limit drops to 25 mph in town, the design of the street does not change,

and speeding has been a perpetual problem. There were a few marked-but-faded crosswalks and few if any sidewalks. Although this small corridor is incredibly financially productive per acre, the design of the road was making it a challenge to serve residents, create a sense of place, or serve the tourists visiting the numerous wineries, breweries, farms, and other sites nearby.

For years, the town's leadership and citizens have been clamoring to make infrastructure investments in the corridor to slow traffic, add parking, create new ways for people to walk safely in town, and encourage more visitors. Thanks to a partnership between the town, the county, the regional planning organization, and the Virginia Department of Transportation, the town was able to accelerate a \$14 million project during the Covid-19 pandemic to make significant physical changes to the road to improve safety and slow down pass-through traffic, provide new attractive gateways on either end, bury all overhead utilities, and invest in outdated drinking water infrastructure, which is amongst the worst in the state.

The town converted two intersections at either end of the town into roundabouts, eliminating dangerous turning conflicts while improving safety for everyone driving and walking. They also added new sidewalks with attractive granite walls that match the town's historic, old stone school, and new raised crosswalks to make people crossing the street more visible and cars more likely to yield as required. They narrowed lanes, added parking along the street, and added signs for the town near each roundabout to welcome visitors and improve the sense of place. The project is a prime example of how rural transportation improvements can help capitalize on the strength of these places while improving safety and access for everyone.



Millinocket, ME focuses on downtown redevelopment and broadband to recover from a mill closure

With a population less than 5,000, Millinocket, ME has experienced the plight of many rural communities across the country that struggle to adapt as legacy industries or major employers that once helped sustain a place slow down or close altogether. For a century, Great Northern Paper served as the primary employer in the town and the largest economic driver in the county before closing in 2008. However, Millinocket is successfully adapting by recognizing the incredible asset it had in its underutilized historic downtown, the center of the community. Millinocket began to focus on downtown revitalization and is already seeing redevelopment, including the creation of new public park and renovation of some historic buildings into residential spaces that will make it easier for people to live, work, and access services and shopping downtown.

Broadband access has been critical to Millinocket's progress. The community secured grant funding to

begin broadband expansion in Millinocket and focused on expanding service in the Main Street area, in the library, hospital, and school.

“[Broadband] will help us attract another generation, a new generation of workers who don’t go to a factory, who don’t go to a large office building but they work from their home. They can work from home, in Millinocket, ME, in this beautiful place with the same access as anywhere on the globe. And that is remarkable.”

Michael Crowley, Executive Director of Our Katahdin and third generation Millinocket resident

Oxford, MS makes downtown streets safer to preserve its downtown character



Oxford focused early on offering good design standards for streets, as well as providing high-speed internet. These strategies paid off—Oxford was ranked ninth for strongest micropolitan economy in the US in 2019.¹⁴

Today, Oxford's Complete Streets resolution is helping to improve safety for people walking in the downtown area, and there are current plans to convert East Jackson Avenue in downtown—which has a row of restaurants and retail—into a more walking-friendly corridor.

Oxford, MS, home of the University of Mississippi, is a college town with about 27,000 residents and a picture-book downtown square, a rich history as the former home of William Faulkner, and a successful food and retail scene. Oxford recognizes that safe, walkable streets are a key part of making downtown economically prosperous. Starting in the 1990s, Oxford's newly formed economic development foundation decided to focus on creating an environment where people would be happy to live, rather than trying to attract a major company or industry.

A number of businesses reported higher sales as a result of temporary outdoor dining in response to the pandemic, so the community also plans to reconfigure the street with permanent outdoor dining space. However, Oxford is struggling with sprawling development like many communities, and local leaders recognize that it could threaten the unique character and existing vital downtown economy. Better federal transportation policy and economic development incentives would help the community continue to focus investment downtown.

Erwin, TN is revitalizing downtown and improving broadband access

While some rural communities have struggled in the face of economic shifts, Erwin, TN—a town of just 6,000 people—is successfully adapting by attracting investment to its historic downtown, expanding broadband, and improving access to local amenities and commercial areas in the process. Erwin already has a relatively compact town center and lots of potential for revitalization, with commercial activity clustered around the downtown area and of the two largest employers in the area located in the southwest area of the city, a short drive from downtown. The city's highest value per acre properties with the greatest economic potential are located in the walkable area downtown and have more than twice the value of the town average as a whole.

Erwin has worked to transform its downtown into a thriving activity center thanks partially to the work of grassroots organization RISE Erwin.¹⁵ Erwin changed some of the town's ordinances to allow residences in the commercial downtown area, marketed the downtown to businesses, and installed several



The Capitol Theatre. Photo by Jimmy Emerson via Flickr

public art projects, including securing Tennessee Arts Commission funding to install a large mural on the pavement of downtown streets in an area with a skate park, library, and two art studios. The city reported that traffic has since slowed on the streets with the mural, making it safer for people walking to the library and skate park.¹⁶

Local leaders saw early that better broadband would be key to downtown revitalization efforts. Erwin Utilities, a municipal electric system, made the decision to invest in fiber to provide broadband to the community and connected the first customers to Erwin Fiber in 2015 before expanding in several

phases. Erwin Fiber has been a huge asset in the community's downtown, allowing Erwin to market itself to larger employers while also supporting new small businesses.

Erwin has driven these catalytic changes thanks to the initiative of committed local leaders and stakeholders, but not all rural communities have the right set of circumstances to jumpstart similar change themselves. They need the support of federal policymakers to make investing in their downtowns more attractive than investing on the fringes, improve the safety of their main streets, and bring twenty-first century internet to their communities.



Downtown Erwin, TN. Photo by Studio Fluid via Flickr

Natchez, MS works to reinvigorate downtown but struggles with broadband access

Natchez, MS, home to 15,000 people, has never been connected to the interstate highway system, though it is connected to the greater region through the Mississippi River and the Natchez Trace historic forest trail. Natchez recognizes that its history and location are unique assets and has adopted an award-winning downtown master plan.¹⁷ The community's downtown revitalization efforts have focused on rezoning and redesigning a bluff overlooking the Mississippi river and highlighting the rich African American history of downtown's MLK Triangle area, creating an arts district, identifying vacant historic buildings located in prime areas for new housing and amenities, and establishing a main street-focused downtown development association.

Yet leaders in Natchez see their limited access to broadband internet as a leading challenge to revitalization efforts. While some residents are able



Downtown Natchez, MS.
Photo by BillyH via Wikimedia.

to access high speed internet, other residents, health care facilities, schools and emergency responders all experienced incomplete services and frequent outages.

Analysis methodology

The data on trip lengths and purposes for urban and rural areas presented in this report came from SGA's analysis of the National Household Travel Survey (NHTS) data from the years 2001, 2009, and 2017. The Trip and Household files were used for all years and allowed the team to designate trips as originating from households in urban or rural areas. Our analysis limited the trips to only those taken by car, and only miles attributed to a driver were used in calculating the total VMT per household. NHTS data uses representative samples, so to obtain more evenly distributed sample sizes, and to more accurately understand differences in rural and urban areas, a more nuanced definition of urban and rural was utilized than what is given as the Census designation. In addition to being categorized as urban by the Census, an area must also be in an MSA (as designated and defined by the Census) for it to be designated as urban for SGA's analysis. Rural areas are classified as areas designated as rural in the Census, and those classified as urban but not contained in an MSA.

Endnotes

1. <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/more-than-one-million-households-without-a-car-in-rural-america-need-better-transit/>
2. <https://www.beckershospitalreview.com/finance/why-rural-hospital-closures-hit-a-record-high-in-2020.html>
3. <https://www.fcc.gov/about-fcc/fcc-initiatives/bridging-digital-divide-all-americans>
4. Bailey, Linda (2004), "Aging Americans: Stranded without Options" Surface Transportation Policy Project, Washington, D.C.
5. <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/resources/driving-down-emissions/>
6. Household vehicle miles traveled (VMT) in urban and rural areas was calculated using the National Household Travel Survey: <https://nhts.ornl.gov/>.
7. <https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/567613-census-rural-america-shrinks-as-people-flock-to-big-cities>
8. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1049.html>
9. <https://www.ugpti.org/resources/reports/downloads/2017-rural-transit-fact-book.pdf>
10. <https://www.governing.com/archive/gov-mississippi-roads-bridges-infrastructure.html>



Transportation for America, a program of Smart Growth America, is an advocacy organization made up of local, regional and state leaders who envision a transportation system that safely, affordably, and conveniently connects people of all means and ability to jobs, services, and opportunity through multiple modes of travel. Smart Growth America envisions a country where no matter where you live or who you are, you can enjoy living in a place that is healthy, prosperous, and resilient.



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