

Recommendations to guide state transportation efforts

Greetings,

Congratulations on your electoral victory! As you take on your new duties and develop your priorities for the coming term, [Transportation for America](#)—a project of [Smart Growth America](#)—is available to provide [technical assistance](#) to your state DOT and local communities, share [insightful research and reports](#), transportation policy analysis and recommendations, and be a sounding board for policy ideas and proposals you and your team are working on.

Transportation policy is complex, and the unique conditions of any state require its own analysis. The interplay of multiple funding sources, differing jurisdictional control, housing supply and density, and regional growth trends are all relevant issues influencing the challenge of meeting a community's transportation needs.

However, these three recommendations are intended to ensure your residents have access to the safest, most productive, connected, and sustainable (both fiscally and environmentally) transportation system:

1. Prioritize maintenance before expanding highways
2. Build more housing near public transit assets
3. Mandate modern, complete street road designs

1. PRIORITIZE MAINTENANCE BEFORE EXPANDING HIGHWAYS

Legislative Action Items

1. Develop new state of good repair performance targets for improving state road and bridge conditions and track system performance
2. Concentrate road funding on maintenance to meet state of good repair performance targets and use maintenance projects to improve safety and add opportunities to walk, bike, and use public transit

Federal law currently requires states to record and [report](#) a variety of performance measures, encompassing safety, infrastructure conditions, and efficiency, to the U.S. Department of Transportation. However, that performance data does not often drive decision-making in state DOTs—and many states have set performance targets that are either at or below current performance levels. States should set aggressive targets for improving the repair of the transportation system and connect funding to those targets. Implementing new goals and tracking them publicly—as Minnesota DOT does on its [Performance Measure Dashboard](#) and Washington State DOT does in its [Gray Notebook](#)—allows your state to bolster its case to constituents when requesting increased federal funding.

Connecting spending to state targets by following a system like Virginia DOT's [Smart Scale](#), which utilizes data and objective measures to inform project selection, could help ensure that investments advance public goals cost-effectively. State DOTs should use transparent, objective metrics to evaluate

projects and score their benefits against costs. Scoring can account for how well projects enhance people's access to jobs and services by all modes of transportation, how much it brings infrastructure into a state of good repair, and how it supports economic development. Integrating project selection processes with performance targets helps to insulate projects from politics and ensures that funding is directed where projects provide the greatest benefits for the least cost.

Ensuring your state DOT prioritizes maintenance over expansion is a prudent, pro-taxpayer move that saves money in both the short- and long-term. [Many states have neglected maintenance in favor of expansion](#). As a result, drivers take [millions of trips](#) over miles of structurally deficient bridges and highways in poor condition, [damaging their vehicles](#), [reducing fuel efficiency](#), and [putting them in harm's way](#) on hazardous roads. Often, neglecting repair ends up costing significantly more, as deferred maintenance can result in the need for full asset reconstruction.

To avoid making problems worse, *states should assess whether they have sufficient funding to maintain any new capacity they plan to build while simultaneously making progress toward repairing the rest of their existing system*. When evaluating capacity-increasing projects for funding, make sure the state has vetted its benefits and costs: new expansion projects should have their cost effectiveness compared against operational improvements, transit and dense development construction, or rail freight improvement.

The pressure to build highway expansion is strong, and these projects often feel more glamorous than repair projects. However, it is important to account for these projects' track record at solving the problems they sought to solve. [Highway expansion projects tend to increase congestion](#) over time, as seen [time](#) and [time](#) again [across the country](#). After years of broken promises that these projects work, [82% of voters](#) don't believe that highway expansion is the best solution to reduce congestion.

Maintenance can be a hassle, but people expect the government to maintain the roadways, as we saw with the "[Fix the Damn Roads](#)" campaign in Michigan. Voters do not want to fund the same projects that are failing to produce results.

2. BUILD MORE TRANSIT AND MORE HOUSING NEAR IT

Legislative Action Items

1. Take a leadership role as a state to fund transit in urban, suburban, and rural areas
2. Remove state restrictions on market-based development near transit to allow more housing, especially affordable housing, and reduce parking mandates.

Public transportation has a myriad of positive benefits that make communities more attractive physically, economically, and environmentally. Transit can save households [hundreds of dollars every month](#) by not having to [maintain a private vehicle](#). Transit investments [also expand economic growth](#) for localities. Even traffic costs the average driver [over a thousand dollars a year](#) in wasted fuel while sitting in congestion waiting to move. Finally, the transportation sector offers one of the best opportunities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, as many private vehicles move very few people. Transportation accounts for [28 percent of the U.S.'s greenhouse gas emissions](#)—with cars, SUVs, and pickup trucks making up [57 percent](#) of those emissions. When properly funded, transit can deliver these benefits and more, particularly when housing for people of all incomes is clustered near transit stops.

However, states have often left transit service to local governments to figure out, and as a result, [30 states spend less than \\$12.50 per capita on transit](#), and 14 states spend less than \$2 per capita. A more coordinated and multimodal approach would result in a better-functioning transportation system and more balanced planning and spending. ***State-level funding is just as imperative to providing high-quality transit service as it is to building a complete and efficient highway system.*** Federal funding is an important but incomplete part of the funding picture and a very small part of the operating costs of both transit and highways. Congress expects state and local governments to cover those costs.

The main sources of revenue for transit at the state and local level are gas, property, income, and sales taxes. Several other common revenue sources include vehicle registration fees, payroll taxes, concessions, and tollway revenues, which are explored further in [Thinking Outside the Farebox](#). ***While states rely heavily on user fees, like the gas tax, to fund transportation, many have constitutional or statutory restrictions against using this funding for transit. States should consider removing them.***

The benefits of public transportation are further enhanced when housing is built nearby. The vast unmet demand for housing served by public transit is evident in the increase in property values by [30 to 150 percent, which could represent a new source of revenue](#). Investing in well-connected communities increases an individual's opportunity to live near thriving economic zones without the burden of owning a car.

Additionally, states can support transit by updating zoning codes to allow more people to live near transit stops. This not only provides a bigger customer base for transit but also lowers [people's overall housing and transportation costs](#). Current approaches to zoning are based on a system created by the [federal government in the 1920s](#) that favors building only single-family homes rather than allowing developers to respond to market demand.

States can address this by updating zoning codes to allow more housing near transit, especially affordable housing, apartments, and starter homes. For example, [Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers signed five bipartisan bills](#) that expanded affordable housing and encouraged housing production. These bills encouraged housing supply by establishing a loan fund program to allow residential developers to cover certain maintenance costs. States can also support reducing parking minimums that take up too much space near transit, blocking the very development that makes transit work more effectively and allows people to move around outside of a car. States should allow cities and developers to base the parking they build on what the market needs, not a decades-old zoning ordinance.

3. MANDATE MODERN, COMPLETE STREET ROAD DESIGNS

Legislative Action Items

1. Establish a strong Complete Streets policy and implementation strategy, including community input and new standards and designs that improve safety, especially for vulnerable users
2. Increase capital and maintenance funding available for active transportation, such as biking or pedestrian projects
3. Try new designs using demonstration projects

The U.S. is in the midst of an alarming [increase in traffic fatalities, with the number of people who are struck and killed or injured while walking reaching record highs in 2022](#). The safety of those inside a vehicle isn't good by international standards either, as the U.S. continues to produce some of the [highest traffic fatality rates in the world when compared to peer countries](#).

Streets are designed to move cars quickly, but sadly, that priority comes at the expense of keeping people safe. When we reprioritize our street design to emphasize safe access for all users and modes of travel, we benefit everyone. “Complete Streets” is an approach to planning, designing, building, operating, and maintaining streets that enables safe access for all people who need to use them, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and transit riders of all ages and abilities.

A Complete Streets approach also provides greater access to everyday necessities, more opportunities for active living, and [increased economic activity](#), all while avoiding the [high costs](#) associated with traumatic roadway crashes. Complete Streets not only foster sustainable, equitable, and livable communities, but they are also a remarkably cost-effective approach to achieving transportation goals relative to conventional transportation projects, with affordable transportation options translating to [money saved for users and jurisdictions](#). An area can quantify the benefits of Complete Streets using [this tool](#).

Elements of Complete Streets projects can include bike lanes, bus lanes, or ADA-accessible sidewalks—all of which can be funded using federal funds. However, it takes more than combining design elements to make systematic improvements toward safer streets. ***To get there, state DOTs should establish and adopt a [strong Complete Streets policy](#) designed to your community’s unique needs and provide funding, staff resources, and accountability for its implementation.*** Existing or in-progress Complete Streets policies can be evaluated through the [Complete Streets Policy Evaluation tool](#) to identify your policy’s strengths and weaknesses for consideration during updates.

States have historically considered Complete Streets and other active transportation initiatives as local issues, leaving the maintenance of active transportation infrastructure to localities—even small rural villages—that do not have the tax base or the staff to effectively do so. Yet most of the most dangerous roads for people walking or biking are owned and managed by state DOTs. These roadways are often designed to move traffic at high speeds, even when they double as Main Streets that connect people to local destinations such as stores, schools, and jobs—contexts where vehicle speed and pedestrian safety are incompatible. ***States should be full participants in the design, funding, and maintenance of active transportation infrastructure if better safety and mobility outcomes are truly priorities.***

Updating approaches and standards while simultaneously training staff and boosting public engagement can be challenging. ***The best way to test that change is by deploying “[quick-build](#)” demonstration projects like the states of Alaska, California, Connecticut, and Tennessee recently did.*** Quick builds are temporary installations that allow practitioners an opportunity to test innovative practices and involve the community in potential design decisions. The low-cost nature of these flexible and adaptable quick-build projects allows communities to explore designs before committing to a permanent project being built.

GET IN TOUCH

Thank you so much for taking the time to read these recommendations to guide transportation efforts. If you have any questions or would like to schedule a call, please reach out to us at info@t4america.org.



Transportation for 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.



Transportation for America is a program of Smart Growth America.