STATE BRIEFING BOOK

Is your state DOT delivering what they promise?

Measuring what matters to taxpayers



Transportation for America

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Transportation for America

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State investment in transportation requires policy change

Better transportation outcomes are essential for your state's success

A strong, modern transportation system supports prosperous communities where businesses thrive, and people of all incomes and ages can live healthy, productive lives. Transportation is one of the most fundamental building blocks of the modern economy and is constantly changing. Your state Department of Transportation (DOT) drives change.

Transportation investment today is still focused on the goals set out in the 1950s: building a highway system. It is not set up or designed to deliver better outcomes in connecting people (in and out of a car) to the things they need, maintaining existing roads, improving roadway safety, and investing in active transportation, public transit, or passenger rail.

A focus on urgently **needed smarter, well-targeted investments would create** a safer, more efficient, and more effective transportation system.

Your DOT needs better focus, not more money

Despite spending billions of dollars on transportation investments that should hypothetically make our transportation system better, our investments are misaligned with the outcomes we're trying to achieve. Many investments actually make outcomes worse, not better. Transportation for America evaluated progress across five key areas: safety; state of repair; investment in transit and active transportation; congestion; and rising transportation costs.

These measures reflect our three priorities: safety, state of repair, and investment in transit and active transportation. We added affordability because it's a top priority for most Americans, and congestion because keeping vehicles moving appears to be the top priority for most transportation agencies, as reflected in their spending and decisions.

The results were stark: **98 percent of state DOTs received a failing grade**. See *Appendix I* for the full list of state DOT grades.

The findings show that more people are dying or being severely injured on our roads, congestion is increasing, roads and bridge conditions aren't improving, and we're still not investing in non-auto transportation options in urban, suburban, and rural communities that could alleviate costs at a time when it's badly needed.

Reorient your DOT to produce your transportation priorities

It is essential to refocus the DOT, including its policies, procedures, and skills, on the outcomes you want, rather than throwing more money at a transportation system producing the problems. It is time to stop asking "how much money should we spend?" and start asking **"what are we getting from the money we're investing?"** This shift will improve accountability and prioritize spending on the results promised to taxpayers across your state.

The first step is to select a state DOT leader who champions these changes and is willing to invest the time needed to change how the agency operates. Achieving better outcomes requires connecting investment decisions to the results they produce. In our recommendations, we depict this as *input → output → outcome*.

Set system priorities → Connect to investments → Get better results

Transportation agencies typically set priorities by creating Long Range Transportation Plans. State DOTs and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) often have a long list of priorities in their long-range transportation plans, but don't apply those priorities to any decision-making. They then get different outcomes from the investments, usually the goals built into the program decades ago. The process is set up to fail because we spend money on a planning process that has no impact on decision-making.

To connect priorities to spending, define three to five outcomes that transportation investments can deliver for the taxpayer and the community. Assign metrics to each priority in order to evaluate projects and project alternatives. **When assigning metrics, avoid using outdated or proxy metrics.** For example, to measure economic competitiveness, most states use vehicle speed as an indicator of improved economic performance. This stems from a history of building freeways and seeking to connect long distances more fluidly. Highway agencies have also used higher speeds as a proxy for time savings (time = speed ***x distance***) because they lacked the data needed to measure trip distances and determine whether speeding up travel meaningfully improves access to jobs and essential services.

As it turns out, much of what we have done to improve speeds has lengthened trips, saving no time at all (e.g., restricting left turns and then requiring a U-turn or three left turns). Further, vehicle speed is a poor measure of whether the economy is doing well. In fact, greater congestion, which is associated with lower vehicle speeds, tends to exist in places with higher economic output. Having no congestion is typical in areas that lack economic activity. As one Texas A&M Transportation Institute staffer said while discussing the impact of COVID-19 on traffic: "As the U.S. economy got better, traffic got worse. So until last year, the fastest way to ease traffic congestion was to have a recession."

When defining system priority metrics, one measure that every transportation agency should use is **access to jobs and services**. If the transportation system isn't getting people where they need to go effectively, then it isn't functional. This has been proposed as a fundamental measure for land use and regional planning since the 1950s, but the data and ability to measure all potential trips were too much for the time. Today, we can do it on our phones.

Measuring access allows transportation agencies to consider *all* modes of travel and capture the needs of people who can't drive due to age, ability, or cost. The beauty of using access to jobs and services as a metric is that it allows broader consideration than measuring vehicle speed. For example, states and cities can improve access to jobs and services by:

- Building new transit or expanding transit service through improved reliability, additional frequency, and bus system redesigns;
- Adding bicycle or pedestrian accommodations that improve safety;
- Investing in housing near job centers or bringing retail, schools, or services closer to where people live, which is a particularly powerful strategy in rural areas.

There are many ways to connect your priorities to your investment decisions. One example is the Commonwealth of Virginia's SMART SCALE. It evaluates how much porposed projects move the needle on their priorities and divides it by cost to the state. Projects are then ranked and funded by both statewide and regional priorities, and scorecards are shared publicly.

Finally, states should look at investments after they are completed to see whether they deliver the results expected and, if not, update their models and procedures to better predict results and direct investments.

Action items:

1. Set three to five separate outcome priorities, which should include access to jobs and services.
2. Identify metrics to evaluate projects for their impact on those priority outcomes.
3. Create a system that provides transparency in investment decisions and how they connect to outcomes.
4. Measure outcomes of investments to see whether they match expectations and update procedures when projections are wrong.

Review procedures → Remove implementation barriers → Reward innovation

Culture eats policy for breakfast. In other words, if you set a policy without changing the culture, the culture will prevail. In transportation, most procedures used by transportation departments today were developed in the 1940s and 1950s to prioritize highway construction and the needs of auto commuters. These procedures have remained in place even though the duties of state transportation departments have expanded and the priorities may have changed.

For example, even if an agency sets safety as its highest priority, it may still struggle to implement it. The process of scoping a roadway or street project starts with accommodating all potential traffic over the next 20 years, and only once those parameters are set do procedures move to considering safety. Even then, procedures do not typically consider non-drivers. Those needs are raised as add-ons after the budget is set, which means those additions will always be considered a budget buster and an added challenge that takes away from the top goal of moving vehicles, even in places that claim non-driver safety and mobility are a priority. And narrowing lanes or implementing road diets often requires laborious, lengthy exception processes, even in places where the state itself has determined that safety should be prioritized over speed.

Elected and appointed leaders often do not want to spend time on these procedural issues, but these **procedural issues are what will prevent leaders from accomplishing their transportation priorities**. Somebody has to do it. To be clear, this does not mean claiming flexibility or allowing designers to seek exceptions to procedures that are blocking priorities. **It means removing them forever.**

For example, Smart Growth America and the Governors' Institute on Community Design helped a small group of state departments of transportation question and assess the underlying assumptions that lead them toward giant highway solutions for every transportation problem.

Our report identifies several necessary steps to build a better state DOT, including:

- Updating agency administration and culture;
- Getting project scopes right on the first try;
- Improving public engagement to serve all communities;
- Reevaluating level-of-service in areas that need redesign;
- Prioritizing projects based on outcomes; and
- Addressing land use context.

Reviewing procedures can result in innovative policy that removes implementation barriers. The Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT)'s Complete Streets Implementation Plan is an ambitious, comprehensive commitment to change how roads are designed and built in Florida to make them safer for all types of travelers, while also promoting economic development and enhancing quality of life. FDOT developed the plan in partnership with Smart Growth America and our program, the National Complete Streets Coalition, over nine months through our Multimodal Development and Delivery technical assistance process.

Action items:

1. Conduct an independent, top-to-bottom review of state DOT procedures to identify barriers to implementing priority policies that result in desired outcomes.
2. Update policy and processes to remove identified barriers.
3. Provide support to agency staff and contractors in implementing changes.

Quick, innovative project delivery → Engage the public → Learn from real-world results

Agency leaders should **encourage immediate interventions and experimentation as a routine way to innovate, improve outcomes, and meaningfully involve the public**. One example of an experiment is a quick build, a temporary installation used to test new street design changes to improve safety and accessibility. They're a great way to engage the community to gather real-time feedback on a potential design, surfacing potential concerns from those who might be hesitant to support a permanent project.

Quick builds have numerous benefits for DOTs, including:

- Allowing the agency to test new designs and materials to learn whether they are worthwhile and potentially add them to their regular procedure. This is how innovation turns into practice.
- Gathering real-world observed data rather than relying on models. This also helps agencies assess the accuracy of their models.
- Engaging the public in a meaningful way. It means that people who are afraid of change can find out if their fears are warranted. The project's temporary nature makes it less threatening and allows people to provide much better input on why the design does or does not work as intended than they can when looking at an engineering sketch or PowerPoint presentation.

- Providing fast, low-cost responses to problems, particularly safety issues. The public can see that this is truly a priority when a project is installed quickly rather than discussed for years. It builds public trust in the DOT because people see the agency deliver real change within a meaningful time frame.
- Partnering with local jurisdictions to learn from and share your expertise, resources, and project delivery for greater efficiency and shared vision.

When implementing experiments, collect data through case studies that define what works, what doesn't, and the barriers to implementation. Over time, lessons from these experiments allow more projects that create better outcomes and improved modeling.

Action items:

1. Require your state DOT to deploy quick-build interventions, especially on safety.
2. Work with independent organizations and the state DOT to collect data, evaluate results, and communicate findings with the public.
3. Create a process to implement lessons in future projects to achieve desired outcomes.

Transportation for America is here to help

Transportation for America, a program of Smart Growth America, is a national nonprofit working to create a transportation system that **safely, affordably, and accessibly** connects everyone to jobs, services, and opportunities. Subscribe to our emails, use our reports, and contact us to ask about our expertise or available support.

Appendix

Appendix I. Outcomes-based grades for state departments of transportation

State	Grade	State	Grade	State	Grade
Alabama	F	Michigan	F	Texas	F
Alaska	F	Minnesota	C	Utah	D-
Arizona	F	Mississippi	F	Vermont	D
Arkansas	F	Missouri	F	Virginia	F
California	F	Montana	F	Washington	F
Colorado	F	Nebraska	D-	West Virginia	F
Connecticut	F	Nevada	F	Wisconsin	D-
Delaware	F	New Hampshire	D-	Wyoming	F
Florida	F	New Jersey	F		
Georgia	F	New Mexico	F		
Hawaii	F	New York	D+		
Idaho	F	North Carolina	F		
Illinois	D-	North Dakota	D-		
Indiana	F	Ohio	D+		
Iowa	F	Oklahoma	F		
Kansas	F	Oregon	F		
Kentucky	F	Pennsylvania	D		
Louisiana	F	Rhode Island	D		
Maine	F	South Carolina	F		
Maryland	F	South Dakota	F		
Massachusetts	D+	Tennessee	F		

Appendix II. Methodology for state departments of transportation grades

To determine a grade for each State Department of Transportation, we started by looking at the performance of the transportation system against Transportation for America's priorities: safety over speed, fix it first, and invest in the rest. Safety is our top priority and is usually listed as the top priority for transportation agencies at all levels of government, so safety performance makes up the highest percentage of a state DOT's scores, followed closely by fixing our crumbling infrastructure.

Beyond our three priorities, we chose two additional performance areas to score. The first is transportation costs. Considering the affordability crisis in the country, this is important to include. Transportation is the second-highest household expenditure, with housing plus transportation costs making up 50% of the average household's expenses according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. And high gas prices are responsible for almost 30% of the increase in the Consumer Price Index, according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics. So it is hard to imagine making significant progress in lowering Americans' cost of living without bringing down the cost of transportation through policies that allow people to take shorter trips, switch to less expensive modes, or access more efficient vehicles.

The fifth measure, congestion, is included for very different reasons. While reducing congestion is not one of T4America's priorities, transportation agencies often cite congestion reduction as the obstacle that prevents them from addressing the other four priorities, and is the stated purpose of so much of their spending. So, according to one of their own preferred measures, how are states doing when it comes to congestion? This is why we included this clear high-priority factor in the score to determine whether the trade-offs were worth it.

This approach also focuses on outcomes, not spending, except in the category of investing beyond highways. Because transportation data often lags by several years, these grades reflect past performance rather than current investments. It is worth considering where each state is spending their time and funding today to get a sense of how these scores might change in the future.

Finally, this is a report card based on Transportation for America's priorities. If your state has different priorities or different levels of emphasis on those priorities, it is a good idea to design your own to determine whether you are getting the outcomes you want from your state's transportation investments. This approach reflects our first recommendation: set a limited number of priorities and measure progress in those areas as well as how investments will contribute to better outcomes in the future.

Our specific measures and weightings are as follows:

Safety (40%)

To calculate safety grades, we used pedestrian fatality rates per capita from Transportation for America's Dangerous by Design 2026, broader motor vehicle fatality rates per capita from NHTSA's Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS), and trends in each rate relative to other states.

State of repair (30%)

State of repair is graded based on National Highway System (NHS) road and bridge condition and the trend in state of repair relative to other states using the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Highway Statistics Series. We also consider each state's ratio of spending on repair to expansion as an indicator of how they prioritize (or do not prioritize) repair.

Invest in the rest (10%)

To measure state investment in other modes, we consider average annual per capita investment in transit, FHWA funding allocations for bicycle and pedestrian projects relative to other states, and scores based on funding allocations for active transportation in the Safe Routes Partnership's 2026 state report cards.

Congestion (10%)

Using data from Reason Foundation's 24th and 29th Annual Highway Reports and five-year population data, we convert average delay per auto commuter to average delay per capita to measure how delay changed between 2017 and 2023 and compare it with how delay was expected to change considering population growth during that period. We also analyze average travel time to work and how that has changed over time.

Transportation costs (10%)

We use the Center for Neighborhood Technology's annual transportation cost estimates for the regional typical household and compare states using percentile rankings.