

State DOT

Policy Agenda | **People-first transportation**

To read the full report, see [Letting People Move](#)

The problem

In the United States, the shortcomings of today's automobile-focused transportation system impact many facets of life, ranging from healthcare access to job retention to air quality. States are in many cases acting against their residents' well-being and their own financial interests by overwhelmingly funding roads and highways in spite of having the ability to distribute funding to other modes.

Transportation policy represents a key tool to address both the cost of living crisis and the climate crisis.

The solutions

States can pursue a 5-pillar strategy:



1. Balance funding to support transportation choices



2. Connect climate goals and transportation planning



3. Reorient project planning, design and permitting



4. Level the playing field: realigning the incentives



5. Transform institutional structures, culture and capacity

State DOTs and governors' offices can begin the following policy agenda immediately without waiting for other branches of government. For more state-level opportunities, see the [Agenda for State Legislatures](#).

To see more detail about these strategies and policies, see [Letting People Move](#).



Strategy 1 Balance funding to support transportation choices

States must infuse financial resources into transit systems, sidewalks and bicycling infrastructure that have been chronically underfunded, because these resources offer many public benefits, including improved safety, public health, air quality, and access to jobs, school, health care, groceries and recreation. States must also wean road expansion projects from the public balance sheet because these investments undermine fiscal responsibility, climate efforts, transit accessibility and public safety goals. Congress, states, and regional and local governments can reallocate existing funds and identify new funding streams. If the majority of new highway construction dollars at all levels of government were diverted into other programs, this would free up roughly \$150 billion per year for other uses.

Pause all highway expansion

New road capacity is the biggest source of new CO2 emissions. For any other policies to have a chance at decreasing overall emissions, states need to pause future expansions and capacity projects already in the planning pipeline to give time for re-evaluation of priorities. This would make billions of dollars available for system maintenance and expansion of transportation choices. Additionally, states could set an expiration of 10 years for funds allocated to highway projects planned but not built.

Example

In 1972, Massachusetts Governor Francis Sargent responded to protests over highway construction plans by declaring a moratorium on freeway construction inside Boston. When LA Metro recently canceled the 710 Freeway project, the decision diverted \$225 million to transit and bike and pedestrian projects, \$188 million to arterial roads and complete streets, and \$210 million for freeway safety and interchange improvements. In 2023, the Welsh government announced it would cancel all major road expansion projects.

Flex highway funds

First, governors and state DOTs can identify and pause unneeded highway projects planned under the state's jurisdiction and flex the funding to transit and active transportation projects. State DOTs can also proactively encourage and facilitate their MPOs to take advantage of flex funding: Assign a flex funding liaison in the state DOT; provide incentives for MPOs; and streamline and fasttrack STIP amendments made for the purpose of flexing funds toward transit and active transportation.

Example

California flexed 20% of its STBG funds to transit between 2021 and 2023. New Jersey flexed 17% of its entire federal highway apportionment to the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) between 2021 and 2023. In 2024, Pennsylvania used flex funding as an emergency measure to prevent transit service cuts for the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority.



Strategy 2 Connect climate goals and transportation planning

Some states have passed strong greenhouse gas (GHG) emission targets. These aspirational goals often do not require specific changes in policy that would help meet the target. When it comes to transportation planning, state DOTs and MPOs have generally continued to operate without consideration for induced vehicle trips or their associated emissions. Policymakers need to adopt new rules to unify transportation and climate goals.

Enact GHG performance measures

States should set declining targets for GHG emissions associated with transportation (and/or VMT), and then measure and report progress. In 2023, the US DOT released a rule that added GHGs to the list of performance measures that state DOTs are required to track; the rule required state authorities to set declining targets to reduce GHG emissions associated with transportation and measure progress towards meeting them. Although this rule has since been overturned in federal court, states have the opportunity to voluntarily comply.

Example

States including Connecticut, Hawaii, and Washington have voluntarily enacted GHG or VMT reporting measures in recent years.



Strategy 3 Reorient project planning, design and permitting

Any road or transit project moves through a sequence of design, administrative, and regulatory steps to get from concept to funding to implementation. These processes continue to favor cars, whether by raising barriers to transit projects or streamlining road projects. The next evolution of the DOT must break this inertia by intentionally redesigning processes to achieve diversified transportation that gets people out of cars rather than urging people into them.

Streamline permitting for transit

Permitting processes need to be reviewed and streamlined to accelerate zero-emissions transportation projects. While legislation is needed for some fundamental changes to permitting procedure, state DOTs can take steps to update impact measures to use VMT (rather than vehicle delay), streamline transit permitting, and improve coordination between permitting agencies to speed up review.

Example

California's [SB 743](#) required the state's environmental review of transportation projects switch from level-of-service (LOS) to VMT criteria when evaluating impact. California's [AB 2503](#) exempts rail electrification projects from state environmental review. Montreal's Réseau express métropolitain rail project moved more [efficiently](#) through permitting and construction due to a [law](#) that granted the project a streamlined permitting process.

Modernize project planning and design guidance

Planning tools and standards need to be scrubbed of car bias. This includes eliminating LOS as a performance metric, requiring multimodal performance metrics, ditching outdated modeling techniques, and improving the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD.)

Example

Several institutions have experimented with alternate ways of evaluating road function for people using multiple modes: [Florida DOT](#) has created a handbook for measuring multimodal level of service; San Francisco Department of Public Health created a Bicycle Environmental Quality Index and [Pedestrian Environmental Quality Index](#) that serve to evaluate streets and intersections; and in Virginia, Fairfax County's DOT created a [Comprehensive Transportation Analysis](#) tool that better accounts for multimodal travel.

Incentivize MPOs

To shift MPO infrastructure investment spending practices, federal and state governments can use carrots by enacting incentives for states—like increased funding—for jurisdictions that meet designated targets, such as: fix-it-first before adding capacity; reduce VMT; improve transit access; and improve transit service. This should be paired with transparency measures to ensure good data tracking and reporting.

Increase transparency

Increasing publicly available information can hold state DOTs accountable for aligning transportation planning with climate, equity, safety and community goals. Foundational transparency policies make other changes possible by daylighting current practices and outcomes. The US DOT could apply requirements to state DOTs, or state DOTs could independently apply them to their MPOs. Reporting could be mandatory or tied to funding. Reporting measures could include the state of good repair; excess road capacity; percentage funds going to highway and road widening; VMT trends; and GHG emissions. The US DOT should also require a standardized format for STIPs and TIPs and their associated reporting.

Example

Minnesota's [Performance Measure Dashboard](#) provides data in dozens of categories, including GHG emissions, VMT per capita, and job accessibility by transit. In 2025, California published five years of data on [highway lane mile expansions](#), as a result of legislation [SB 695](#) requiring greater transparency. Missouri DOT's [Tracker](#) offers another good example of transparency across a variety of measures, although does not include VMT or GHG.

Guide project planning at state level

States should be proactive about facilitating a coherent project selection process that prioritizes diverse transportation options. DOTs need to create a firewall between project selection and politics by requiring and enforcing a performance-based process that ranks projects based on project outcomes. States should pair project selection criteria with transparency measures, to ensure accountability, and improved multimodal performance metrics, to ensure road projects are not evaluated on a curve.

Example

Virginia's [SMART SCALE](#), created through legislation in 2016, scores projects on a weighted scale that includes measures safety, congestion mitigation, accessibility, environmental quality, economic development, and land use.



Strategy 4 Level the playing field: realigning the incentives

In most US towns and cities, people are incentivized to drive due to decades of policy and funding decisions that tilt the playing field towards cars as the default transportation choice. Although the most significant incentive to drive may be the built environment, this strategy also targets incentives that fall outside of the physical infrastructure. Every level of government has a responsibility to rebalance transportation options to incentivize modes that have greater social benefit and allow people the freedom to choose. State DOTs can help facilitate these changes.

Encourage local interventions to balance incentives

Local governments can pass a range of policies to make it relatively easier to get around without a car, including eliminating parking minimums and creating low-traffic zones. Federal and state governments can encourage and incentivize these policies by issuing guidance and making grant funding contingent on having certain policies in place. State governments can also preempt local parking requirements.

Example

At least 85 cities in the United States have eliminated parking minimums for development. California eliminated parking requirements near transit statewide. The city of Boston has for decades successfully placed restrictions on vehicle traffic within the downtown commercial district known as Downtown Crossing.

Reduce non-infrastructural barriers to bike and pedestrian safety.

State governments should consider a package of reforms to mend the inhospitable nature of the country's roads, laws, and culture when it comes to protecting and enabling bicyclists and pedestrians. These changes would support people who currently move around without a car, and also give more people the confidence and security to use these modes. State DOTs can

play a role in recommending appropriate changes and collaborating with other agencies to issue guidance or propose new rules. Meaningful reform would include: 1) traffic law reform to decriminalize jaywalking, increase penalties for unsafe drivers, clarify and update rules to protect people walking or biking, and give bicyclists greater flexibility; 2) reduced speed limits, including eliminating the 85th percentile rule and allowing municipalities to set lower speed limits as they see fit for safety; and 3) Department of Motor Vehicles driver education reform to protect bicyclists, pedestrians on shared streets.

Example

Madrid, Spain passed a package of bicycle laws in a 2018 ordinance that gives bikes greater prominence and protection in city traffic laws.



Strategy 5 Transform institutional structures, culture and capacity

At every level of government, there are opportunities to disrupt patterns of automobile-centric planning and road expansion by shifting staff balances and introducing new leadership and workplace accountability.

Revamp state structures & culture

Typically, a governor appoints a DOT executive and that executive is accountable only to the governor. Public pressure on the governor is the primary pathway for public accountability. As one moves down the organizational chart, staff become even less accountable to the public. Some measures that state DOTs can take to improve public oversight and ensure staff operate in line with the agency's publicly stated goals include:

- establishing public advisory boards to evaluate DOT performance in meeting its state-mandated targets can help ensure DOT leadership is in step with public opinion and community needs;
- better training and performance evaluation to move staff out of the highway-oriented habits of past decades and initiating and reinforcing practices that lead to greater community participation, people-first focus to reach diversified transportation outcomes;
- more collaboration across divisions within the DOT, so that road practitioners are not siloed from bike, pedestrian, and transit planners and vice versa.

Require MPOs to enact proportional representation

MPO decisions often undervalue input from constituents who would benefit from transit and active transportation investments. In many cases, each city in the metropolitan region gets one vote on any issue that comes before the board, with small and large cities getting equal weight. This means that residents of larger cities have less representation per capita. Because denser, bigger cities often rely on public transit more, this inequity often leads to reduced investment in public transit and increased investment in highways,

increasing emissions. MPO proportional representation can be achieved through weighted voting structures or greater board membership for larger municipalities. A [DOT survey](#) published in 2017 found that only 13 percent of MPOs (36 of 276) reported having an option for a weighted voting structure, and some of those had never used it.

Example

In 2017, the California Legislature passed AB 805, which gave San Diego MPO board members the ability to [invoke a weighted vote](#) if a measure fails to pass with the tally vote.

Additional important priorities

This agenda orients toward policies that would contribute to mode shift and VMT reduction during peoples' day-to-day transportation activities. It also orients more toward policies that flow through federal and state DOTs.

Numerous other policies can help offer people better options to move around without a car, whether by improving street safety, increasing transit efficacy and ridership, or building more compact walkable cities. Although the topics below are not included in the above agenda, they are also worthy of attention:

- Providing funding and policy support to increase intercity travel options, including intercity rail and bus; this will include addressing problems with Class I freight rail operators that interfere with passenger rail service.
- Expanding support for rural transit and public ride-sharing programs.
- Supporting transit safety ambassadors, the return of small-scale commerce at transit stops, and other nonpolicing methods for improving safety onboard transit vehicles and at transit stations.
- Supporting the transit workforce:
 - investing in workforce development to increase transit workers, active transportation maintenance, and planners

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- ensuring good pay, benefits, and working conditions along with collective bargaining
 - prioritizing and funding worker safety measures
 - Zoning and land use (facilitating built environments that increase transportation options)
 - transportation-land use coordination; land use policy that favors density and mixed uses
 - parking and land use efficiency, including using publicly owned land at transit stations to build social housing
 - grants for localities contingent on updated zoning to allow multifamily dwellings near to transit
 - accessory dwelling units permitting reform
 - by right zoning