



NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION TRANSPORTATION PLANNING BOARD
Policy Principles for the Reauthorization of
Federal Surface Transportation Programs
April 30, 2025

Our nation's success and prosperity are the result of generations of innovators, leaders, and workers collaborating to facilitate commerce and grow our economy. One of the underpinnings supporting our growth and competitiveness is world-class transportation infrastructure that promotes commerce and provides essential connections for all people to safely and efficiently access economic opportunities and contribute fully to the nation's success.

The federal government has played a key role in supporting transportation investments throughout our history. The benefits of federal investment in a balanced, multi-modal transportation system have long been recognized as critical to our national interest, promoting economic competitiveness and providing access to opportunity for all. In addition, the federal government has a unique obligation to support interstate commerce and to meet critical emergency and security requirements and thus should make a significant financial investment in maintaining, operating, and building our transportation infrastructure.

As part of its interest and obligation to build, operate, and maintain a strong national, multi-modal surface transportation infrastructure, the federal government, through its Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962, established Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) and required them to perform a continuing, comprehensive, transportation planning process undertaken cooperatively by the states and local governments (called the 3C process). The National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board (TPB) is the federally mandated MPO for the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area and it epitomizes a successful 3C process, stretching across two states and 21 local governments (including the District of Columbia), and it strives for an excellent surface transportation system in the National Capital Region.

The federal government's commitment to the nation's surface transportation infrastructure and its partnership with the state and local governments have manifested in various multi-year, multi-modal federal transportation bills, including the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), scheduled to expire October 1, 2026. As the current Congress begins work on reauthorizing the Federal Surface Transportation Act, the TPB respectfully submits the following consensus-based policy principles to guide reauthorization of the Federal Surface Transportation Programs. These principles are based on approaches to transportation infrastructure investment decisions that provide the National Capital Region with a robust transportation system to improve mobility, provide all people with safe and efficient access to economic opportunities, and reduce vehicle emissions that contribute to air pollution and climate change.

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1. ADDRESS THE FISCAL IMBALANCE IN THE HIGHWAY TRUST FUND (HTF):

The HTF established in 1956 to fund transportation projects, relies primarily on gasoline and diesel taxes, whose growth has been insufficient to pay for the program's outlays.¹ Due to this structural imbalance between revenue and expenditure, the federal government has relied on general fund revenue transfers, creating uncertainty and underinvestment in the transportation system. Given the critical role of the surface transportation system to the nation's security and prosperity:

- a. the HTF revenues must be reset to ensure they fully meet the current and future needs of the HTF outlays,
- b. the baseline of HTF revenue must be at the current IIJA levels and keep up with inflation to support a world class transportation system, and
- c. all reasonable strategies for increased revenue that provide long-term stability and predictability should be pursued.

2. STRENGTHEN FEDERAL COMMITMENT TO MULTI-MODAL TRANSPORTATION SYSTEMS:

To ensure the country has a world-class transportation system -- one that improves mobility, increases economic competitiveness, and reduces air pollution -- the transportation system should offer choices for people and business to access jobs and other opportunities that are needed to succeed in our economy. Such choices should include safe and reliable travel on our highways, on our public transportation systems, and via bicycle and pedestrian travel. Additionally, metropolitan areas with their large population and constraints on land use, face unique challenges in addressing the mobility and accessibility needs to support its substantial economic activity. Multi-modal transportation systems are especially effective in such areas and are also a proven approach to addressing the mobility needs of lower-income households, and those with unmet mobility needs, who are less likely to own an automobile. As such:

- a. federal funding programs must cover all modes of travel with funding available for planning, design, construction, operations, and maintenance of the system/service
- b. continued and additional federal funding for intercity rail, commuter rail service and extension of the federal PRIIA funding are essential for the national capital region's mobility and economic vitality, and
- c. transportation agencies must have maximum flexibility to transfer federal funds among the different modes to maximize safety, reliability, mobility, and accessibility outcomes.

3. PROMOTE EFFICIENT AND EFFECTIVE PLANNING AND PROJECT DEVELOPMENT:

Efficiency in the project development process is important to address transportation system needs in a timely and cost-effective manner. Additionally, the ability of transportation agencies to use the funding available to implement the best suited strategy to achieve a defined outcome provides for effective project planning and implementation. Also, for transportation projects to be effective, the project's scope should be based on performance outcomes. As such an authorized transportation bill must:

- a. streamline federal planning and environmental review processes, outlined in IIJA, that are aimed at ensuring timely delivery of transportation projects,

¹ See, for example, Congressional Budget Office, "The Status of the Highway Trust Fund: 2023 Update" (Testimony, Subcommittee on Highways and Transit Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C., October 18, 2023), <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/59634>.

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- b. consolidate the different funding programs that have similar policy objectives into a block grant formula program allowing states and local governments flexibility to optimize delivery,
- c. while maintaining maximum funding amounts across both formula and discretionary programs, provide most of the funding using non-discretionary formula funding mechanisms with federal discretionary grants used for projects with multi-jurisdictional or national impacts, and
- d. promote a stronger adherence to the current federal principle of performance-based planning and programming by ensuring that performance outcomes of all modes of travel are fully considered.

4. ENSURE SAFETY AND RELIABILITY OF THE TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM AND SERVICES:

Travel on our roadway and transit system is a significant contributor to the nation's economy and society's functioning. The fatalities and serious injury crashes on our highway and transit systems are unacceptable and undermine the reliability of the transportation system. Similarly, severe weather has always been and will continue to pose a threat to the integrity of the infrastructure. Climate change has caused the frequency and severity of such threats to increase in recent decades. Additionally, the emission of pollutants by vehicles also poses public health concerns. Low-income households and those facing unmet mobility needs tend to be most impacted by safety, reliability, and emissions challenges of the surface transportation system. Given the critical nature of the surface transportation system for people's wellbeing and the nation's physical and economic security:

- a. federal policy and financial support for addressing the highway and transit safety outcomes should be retained and enhanced,
- b. it is critical that federal policy and funding priorities support efforts to ensure the resiliency of the transportation system,
- c. federal policy should ensure vehicle technology and operations improve safety outcomes and reduce emissions for the users and non-users of the system, and
- d. prioritize federal funding for projects and investments that maintain and modernize the existing transportation system; invest in assets or technologies that deliver cost efficiencies.

5. SUPPORT AND STRENGTHEN COLLABORATION ACROSS JURISDICTIONS:

The impacts of transportation systems and services are not limited to one jurisdiction or community. The fact that people and goods constantly move across jurisdictional borders is reflected in the interstate commerce approach the federal government has taken to the design, implementation and operations of surface transportation systems. Collectively, metropolitan areas in the United States account for the majority of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP), driving economic prosperity to both these regions and to the rest of the states where they are located. Inter-jurisdictional cooperation is especially vital for supporting low-income households and those facing unmet mobility needs, as a household's travel patterns often span multiple jurisdictions. MPOs bridge the gap in cross jurisdictional collaboration in planning and prioritizing transportation investments that are needed to ensure the current and future economic vitality of these regions. As such, federal policy and program requirements should:

- a. reaffirm the MPO's role in the planning and programming process, and
- b. provide MPOs with a stronger role in project development and programming processes, including monitoring and reporting outcomes of investments.