

POLICY WEBINAR

# Transportation, Small Towns, + Rural Communities



WITH  
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**Access to jobs, schools, shopping, and critical community services is vital for Americans living in small cities and towns, and rural communities.** But all too often there aren't options for getting around, forcing families to drive long distances on poorly maintained roads to reach everyday destinations. By failing to preserve our existing transportation network and harness the power of new technologies, we are leaving millions of Americans isolated from economic opportunity.



**Rural areas and small towns have higher concentrations of elderly and low-income citizens, who can greatly benefit from access to a variety of transportation options.** In addition, children in rural areas are 25 percent more likely to be overweight or obese than those in urban areas<sup>1</sup> and face unique barriers to being active and maintaining a healthy weight<sup>2</sup>. Our current pattern of dispersed growth in many rural areas makes adequate transportation critical to give students access to opportunities for physical activity.



**Our nation's transportation infrastructure should provide access for all Americans,** regardless of their geographic location, age, income, or disability status. We need to care for our existing transportation network, while ensuring that we build a 21st century system that will allow residents of rural communities, small cities, and small towns to thrive.

**There is a need for change.**

## Rural + Small Town Transportation

# facts

- More than 1.6 million rural households do not have access to a car<sup>3</sup>.
- Demand for better transportation is growing – between 2002 and 2005, ridership for small urban and rural public transportation systems jumped nearly 20 percent<sup>4</sup>.
- Across America, households in the lowest 20 percent income bracket spend about 42 percent of their annual income on transportation<sup>5</sup>. This burden is especially heavy during periods of high energy costs, since residents of rural areas drive about 17 percent more than urban residents.
- Rural households are more likely to own or lease fuel-inefficient vehicles like pick-up trucks and SUVs. 37 percent of rural households own or lease a pick-up truck compared to 17 percent of households overall<sup>6</sup>.
- Mobility options too often solely include vehicle-based transportation. For example, **17 percent of rural residents in high poverty counties carpool**, while 13 percent of workers in non-metro counties share rides<sup>7</sup>.
- Limited transportation options are causing traffic congestion in small towns and rural areas to increase by 11 percent per year, twice the rate of large, urban areas<sup>14</sup>.
- There are more than 450,000 rural bridges, and almost half of the bridges more than 20 feet long are structurally deficient.
- 58 percent of highway fatalities occur on rural roads, a rate twice that of urban roads<sup>8</sup>.
- Rural highways constitute about 3.1 million of the 3.9 million miles of public roads, carrying about 40 percent of the total volume. These roads are mostly two-lane, and a high percentage (more than 50 percent) of lower-class roads remain unpaved.

## The current transportation program leaves rural communities stranded

The 56 million residents of rural areas and small towns – about 20 percent of the population of the United States – need change in the way we plan, fund and maintain our national transportation system. Rural areas and small towns often fall through the cracks of federal transportation policy, which focuses on statewide priorities for building new highways and often overlooks local needs and preferences. Federal funding is allocated to small and mid-sized cities and rural areas through State Departments of Transportation (DOTs), while small Metropolitan Planning Agencies (MPOs) and Rural Planning Organizations (RPOs) have limited decision-making authority and control over funding, which is itself limited at the local level. The decisions that affect local transportation initiatives are often made with little attention to local preferences and concerns.

## Access to jobs and the economy is critical

To ensure that small cities and towns remain economically viable, we must preserve and enhance their downtowns while making them more walkable and accessible. These components are a critical to a complete transportation system and are crucial to creating attractive and vibrant town centers.

The current transportation system hurts rural and small town economies by limiting the ability of the manufacturing sector to adapt to changes in the marketplace. Recent growth in the amount of freight transported through rural areas has resulted in the nation's highways, railroads, and waterways operating at or near capacity. Without investment in multi-modal transportation systems - including intercity rail - it will be increasingly difficult for rural economies to respond to global changes, hurting regional and national competitiveness.

Rural transportation connects people to jobs, health care, and family and contributes to regional economic growth by connecting businesses to customers, goods to markets, and tourists to destinations. Research has shown that rural and small metropolitan transit services offer measurable economic benefits. In one study, rural counties with transit service were found to have 11 percent greater average net earnings growth over counties without transit, and the estimated annual impact of rural public transportation on the national economy was over \$1.2 billion<sup>9</sup>.

### Despite facing complicated program requirements and insufficient financial assistance, small towns and rural communities across the country have created innovative transportation programs that address their unique needs.



In Harris County, TX, taxi operators assist seniors by providing Medicaid transportation, ADA paratransit, and other contract services for transit agencies. A countywide user-side subsidy program utilizing taxis is under development<sup>10</sup>.



In the Mitchell, South Dakota area (pop. 14,558), local community groups created public transportation alternatives that expanded access to medical treatment and lowered health care costs by reducing in-patient medical treatment and the costs of emergency response<sup>11</sup>.



In Alabama, small urban and rural communities use state and county vehicles, including school buses, to provide access to jobs or other services. The buses, which already stop in residential areas, connect recipients to training, employment, and transportation options<sup>12</sup>.



In Suffield, CT, (pop. 10,400) transportation and land use planning were coordinated to achieve a more efficient growth pattern. A community plan was developed using charrettes and a Visual Preference survey. New zoning regulations facilitated a modification of Main Street mixed-use downtown development, and the preservation of agricultural land, without damaging the town's character<sup>13</sup>.



Additional stops on the RailRunner commuter rail service between Albuquerque and Santa Fe have been provided to connect rural communities, including Belen and Bernalillo, to jobs in these cities in an effort to increase mobility, improve air quality, generate new economic opportunities, and increase regional access to jobs, schools, services, and shopping. In 2008, New Mexico residents voted for a new sales tax to further support the commuter train and other surface transportation projects, in Bernalillo, Sandoval, and Valencia Counties.



# We can make a difference... here's how.

## Next Steps ---

Give rural areas and small towns the tools to create sustainable, livable communities

- Establish a set of National Transportation Objectives and Performance Targets to ensure investments in the transportation system are efficient, smart, and coordinated between regions and within metropolitan areas.
- Increase local control over project selection and prioritization to ensure investments are made in infrastructure projects that support economic development, access to jobs, and community revitalization.
- Strengthen regional collaboration and decision-making to integrate transportation, economic development, housing, water quality, and climate change planning.
- Target transportation investments to support compact communities that give people convenient options to safely walk, bike, ride, and drive.
- Use federal funds to leverage and invest directly in projects that bring destination land uses, (schools, groceries, health care services, etc.) to community centers, such as small towns and Main Street areas, as part of a comprehensive local accessibility strategy.
- Increase funding for paratransit and other specialized transportation services for elderly, disabled, and low-income populations that improve access to vital services and local destinations.
- Increase the share of long-distance goods movement by railroad to increase farm-to-market connections, improve highway safety and repair, and support local economic development efforts.



We support a U.S. transportation system that includes a wide array of accessible, affordable and interconnected transportation choices that are both healthy for the environment and for people.



Transportation for America is a growing and diverse coalition focused on creating a national transportation program that will take America into the 21st century by building a modernized infrastructure and healthy communities where people can live, work and play.

We have formed a broad coalition of real estate, housing, environmental, public health, equity, business, transportation and other organizations that seek to align our national, state, and local transportation policies with an array of issues: economic opportunity, climate change, energy security, health, housing and community development. We believe a new national vision will play a key role in strengthening the foundation of our nation.

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