

TRANSPORTATION—Are We There Yet?

Reform of the Federal Surface
Transportation Program—2009

transportation

reform



Back to Basics—Accountability for Results

Americans have a right to demand that transportation investments meet community needs, are spent wisely and accountably, and improve their quality of life. They agree that one of the government’s most fundamental roles is to build and maintain roads. While transportation investment must be increased, top-to-bottom reforms are needed to guarantee that taxpayers will get their money’s worth. What we need is a program that will be accountable for results, make investments based on community needs, and deliver projects on-time and on-budget.

Past Practice	Recommended Change
Pork Barrel Spending, Earmarks	Drastically reduce earmarking. Emphasize community-driven project selection.
Proliferation of Goals, Lack of Focus and Priority	Refocus highway and transit programs on national objectives which meet community needs.
No correlation between program structure and national objectives	Restructure highway and transit programs to directly address priority objectives.
Lack of accountability for results	Measure progress toward meeting state-determined targets, report on results.
Long delays in project delivery	Cut by half the project review process. Deliver “Win–Win” transportation and environmental outcomes.

AASHTO recommends:

1. Refocus the Federal Program on National Objectives

The current laundry list of over 100 different program objectives for highways, and another 50 for the transit program makes it difficult to identify true program priorities. The federal program must refocus on six objectives of genuine national interest.

- **Preservation and Renewal.** Preserving highway, transit, and rail systems so they last for generations to come.
- **Interstate Commerce.** Supporting America’s global competitiveness, growth in productivity, economic development, and national defense through an improved multi-modal freight system.
- **Safety.** Reducing traffic fatalities, serious injuries, and property loss.
- **Congestion Reduction and Connectivity for Both Urban and Rural Areas.** Improving the ability of highway, transit, and rail to improve personal mobility, connectivity, and accessibility.
- **System Operations.** Using advanced management techniques and technologies to assure travel reliability and provide effective emergency response in disasters.
- **Environment.** Enhancing community quality of life, and minimizing impacts on the environment and global climate change.

2. Establish Goals Through Which the National Objectives Can Be Achieved

To ensure accountability for federal funding, goals should be established for the national objectives. AASHTO, in consultation with Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), cities, counties, transit agencies, the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), and U.S. DOT, should develop national performance goals for each objective. The goals should be formally submitted to the Secretary of Transportation, and promulgated as guidance. No rule-making process would be required or desired.

3. Plan and Select Projects Based on a State-Driven Performance Management Approach

To align project selection with the national objectives, AASHTO supports the development of a state-driven performance management process in which each state DOT, and its MPOs, would focus federal funding on meeting national performance goals. Each state would adopt performance targets relating to the national goals in their long-range planning process.

4. Develop State-Driven Performance Measures Process

To improve accountability for achieving national objectives, each state will be called on to develop specific measures through which they can track and report on results.

Candidate measures will be recommended through an AASHTO-developed process to have all states use the same performance measures. For example, under the category of “safety,” a measure could be the number of traffic-related fatalities in the state for the year. However, it is important for Congress to define a process through which states self-define targets that would work in their unique context, rather than have measures and targets imposed through federal statute or regulation.

Flexibility is key. The recommended performance management process would have key common elements and measurement areas among states, but each state would determine its own performance targets and the appropriate strategies to meet those targets. Not every state will improve on every performance measure every year. Not every state will lead on every issue. What matters is that they start off in the right direction.

A performance-oriented pilot program should be created to provide regulatory relief for those states which have successfully established targets.

5. Restructure Transportation Programs to Focus on the National Objectives

Another element of reform to ensure federal dollars are invested to achieve national objectives is to restructure current highway and transit programs.

NATIONAL HIGHWAY PROGRAMS

AASHTO proposes that the federal highway program get back to the basics established in 1991, when 90 percent of federal funds were apportioned by formula to states and spent according to the priorities established by the states and their MPOs. The remaining 10 percent would be used for:

- Research: 1 percent,
- Federal Lands: 2.2 percent, and
- Consolidated National Programs: 6.8 percent.

Proposed Core Highway Program Structure

Preservation and Renewal:
Interstate Preservation
National Highway System Preservation
Bridge Preservation
Freight Program
Safety Program
Operations and Management Program
Transportation System Improvement/ Congestion Reduction Program
Environment Program:
Air Quality and Climate Change

The Consolidated National Programs category would be new or previously authorized programs Congress believes are national priorities such as Scenic Byways, Rail Crossings, and projects of national and regional significance.

TRANSIT PROGRAMS

Transit program can be restructured on a parallel with highways to include:

- Preservation and Renewal,
- Operations,

- Congestion Relief and Metro Mobility,
- Enhancements/Quality of Life, and
- Research and Planning.

MULTI-MODAL APPROACH

All of our transportation resources will be needed to meet future national needs. This will require continuation of the ability to flex highway funds to transit, and vice versa, continuation of the current eligibility of rail projects for funding, investment tax credits for rail projects which benefit the public, and a planning process which considers all modal options and new funding programs to meet the substantial highway freight corridor needs.

Funding Goals for Next Surface Transportation Authorization

Highways	\$ 375 billion
Transit	\$ 93 billion
Freight	\$ 42 billion
Intercity Passenger Rail	\$ 35 billion
Total	\$ 545 billion

6. Speed Project Delivery

Today, a typical highway project can take from 10 to 15 years to complete—up to six years for the environmental process, and up to nine years for planning, design, and construction. Federally funded transit projects face a protracted process as well.

Reform is needed to cut project delivery times in half. Congress should mandate that federal agencies collaborate with states to make it possible to do in 5 to 7 years what currently takes 10 to 15 years. Collaboration between natural resource protection agencies and transportation agencies should be mandated by Congress so they find “win-win” solutions to improve both environmental and transportation outcomes.

7. Eliminate or Limit Earmarking in the Federal Transportation Program

More than 6,000 earmarks, costing some \$24 billion, were included in SAFETEA-LU, up from 1,800 earmarks included in TEA-21, in 1998. Earmark reform has emerged as a key issue for restoring public confidence.

No more than five percent of the overall program should be designated through Congressional earmarks, as was the case in ISTEA. If Congress designates high-priority projects from within a state's federal funding, all earmarked projects should be drawn from a Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) or a Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) listing that has been approved by a state DOT and its MPOs.

The Key Ingredient for Reform: Leadership

More than 50 years ago, the interstate vision became reality because of leadership by elected, business, and labor leaders. We need that same kind of leadership today to reform and improve our transportation program. We must come together with smart solutions to keep our transportation system viable and vital, in order to keep this country prosperous, protected, and strong.

