



PUBLIC TRANSIT BRIEFING

FOR FEDERAL CANDIDATES



WISCONSIN

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INTRODUCTION

Transportation funding levels and policies directly impact the issues that voters care about most. A good-paying job, affordable groceries, and quality health care are a lot less meaningful if you're in traffic for hours each day, spend over a thousand dollars every month on car expenses, and risk financial ruin from a pothole each time you get behind the wheel to go to work, the grocery store, or the doctor's office.

On these very salient issues—as well as a wide range of other issues, such as supply-chain-related inflation, veterans' access to health care, and the successful re-entry of incarcerated people into society—better transportation policy and, especially, support for public transit can improve people's lives.

Voters recognize this. In every year since 2018, over three-quarters of local ballot measures to fund public transit have passed. Further, opinion polling shows that the public strongly supports investments in public transit, walking and biking, as well as “fix it first” policies that prioritize properly maintaining existing roads over expensive and damaging highway expansion.

With the expiration of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) on September 30, 2026, federal elected officials will soon have an opportunity to harness this popularity. While it is possible Congress will pass a full replacement this year, it is also possible that there will be a one-year extension into 2027. Either way, this means that **candidates for Congress in 2026 have a rare chance to run on delivering improvements to public transit that are popular in communities around the country, year after year.**



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Transportation in Wisconsin:

National Annual Cost of Car Ownership: **\$12,297**

Percent of Pavement in Unacceptable Condition in 2024: **27**

2023 Traffic Deaths: **583**

Percent of People Over 10 Years Old Who Are Non-Drivers: **33.52%**

Public Transit Capital Projects Seeking Federal Funding: **2**

2023 PUBLIC TRANSIT RIDERSHIP —

Urbanized Area Passenger Trips: **41,160,551**

Rural Area Passenger Trips: **2,358,688**



“Having a good public transit system really helps people get from place to place easily. It can mean the difference between having a job or not because of transportation issues. It allows people to travel to different destinations that they otherwise wouldn’t be able to travel very well.”

—ERIK PETTERSEN
Madison, WI



But in order to deliver improvements, it is important to look beyond the top-line numbers included in press releases. **When Congress writes the next surface transportation reauthorization, it is imperative to judge its success based on the outcomes it delivers on the ground, not how many dollars it distributes.**

In the following pages, we describe why transportation, and especially public transit, is a kitchen table issue, describe solutions that communities are seeking for their transportation problems, and highlight existing federal legislation that would resolve these issues if passed.

PUBLIC TRANSIT IS A KITCHEN TABLE ISSUE

Transportation is closely connected to the issues that voters care most about. Whether people can afford a good life with their family, live in a healthy and vibrant community, and get home safely at the end of the day is all deeply connected to how they get around. Quality, reliable public transit—and the walking and biking infrastructure that makes communities transit-ready—is key to making our country more affordable, safer, healthier, and more economically vibrant.

AFFORDABILITY

Transportation is the [second-most-expensive item](#) on the average household's budget, after housing. Many people live in communities that require them to drive long distances to get to work, school, the doctor, and more, [increasing their transportation costs](#). This places working- and middle-class people in the United States between a rock and a hard place: either [pay more than \\$10,000 per year](#) to own and drive a car or pay the [time tax](#) of having to rely on low-quality public transit, walking, or biking to get around (if public transit service, sidewalks, and safe bike infrastructure even exist where they live). This has been called the "[impossible paradox of car ownership](#)".

Quality, reliable public transit can help households avoid this choice and save thousands of dollars per year, whether they're able to replace just a few car trips with public transit or they have the freedom to make all their trips without a personal vehicle.

SAFETY

In 2024, [nearly 40,000 people](#) died on roads in the U.S.. Although this is a few thousand fewer than 2022—the end of a [significant surge in traffic deaths](#) that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic—the rate of traffic deaths per 100,000 people in the United States is still [several times higher than peer nations](#) like the United Kingdom and Sweden. Furthermore, pedestrian traffic deaths have continued their post-2010 increase to reach over [7,500 people per year, or more than 20 people per day](#) losing their lives walking in 2022. This is not to mention the [millions of people](#) who are injured in crashes each year. In contrast, [public transit is one of the safest ways to travel](#).

Quality, reliable public transit can reduce the number of deaths and injuries on American roadways.



PUBLIC TRANSIT IS A KITCHEN TABLE ISSUE

HEALTH

Transportation has significant impacts on health, at both [community and individual levels](#). Over half of vehicle emissions come from the cars that most of us drive every day, otherwise known as [light-duty vehicles](#). Nearly half of the U.S. population breathes in unhealthy levels of pollution each day thanks to these emissions, aggravating diseases like asthma and increasing the risk of lung and heart diseases. This burden is disproportionately felt by communities of color and working-class [communities near highways](#), as shown in metropolitan areas like [Los Angeles](#) and [Denver](#). The lack of public transit to grocery stores, medical facilities, and social centers can prevent people from accessing healthy food options, be a major barrier to health care, and leave them socially isolated. Furthermore, a lack of safe places to walk, bike, and wait for public transit in many communities can make it difficult to get a healthy level of physical activity.

Quality, reliable public transit—and the walking and biking infrastructure that supports it—reduces pollutants and makes it easier for everybody to maintain healthy habits.



ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

Transportation is a crucial component of the U.S. economy, contributing [nearly \\$2 trillion to national GDP](#) in 2023. But not all modes of transportation are created equally. A significant investment in public transit would [generate \\$5 in economic activity](#) for every dollar spent, and every dollar invested in rail transportation [drives \\$2.50 in economic activity](#). Interstates, despite their reputation as a driver of economic growth, historically [generate only \\$1.80 in economic activity](#) for every dollar spent building them. [More recent studies](#) show the costs of highway expansions exceed their benefits by 17 percent, without even accounting for land value. Furthermore, the [structure of the interstate system](#) devastated the economies of small cities that it bypassed, led to the depopulating of the urban areas it was built through, and continues to leave billions of dollars worth of prime urban real estate untaxed in cities like [Washington, D.C.](#) and [Atlanta](#). In contrast, [public transit encourages productive land use](#) and increases businesses' productivity, while also decreasing congestion.

Quality, reliable public transit creates the economically vibrant and resilient places all communities hope to be.

REAUTHORIZATION IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO INVEST IN PUBLIC TRANSIT

Communities across the country are demanding a reauthorization that makes communities more affordable, safer, healthier, and more economically vibrant.

The surface transportation reauthorization should...

- make it **less expensive** for people to go to work, school, medical appointments, and more;
- help ensure **more people get home safely** at the end of the day;
- **improve the health** of communities and individuals;
- **and build a strong national economy** made up of active, resilient local economies.

Even though public transit helps deliver on all of these outcomes, it has been consistently underfunded. Over the 70 years since President Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, [highways have received \\$13.6 trillion](#) in funding from all levels of government. During that same period of time, public transit has received just \$4 trillion.



This underfunding extends to the pedestrian and biking infrastructure and passenger rail that works in concert with public transit. The IIJA did [significantly increase funding](#) for these modes of transportation, helping communities across the country to build crucial public transit links, street safety projects, and passenger rail infrastructure. But six years of investment does not erase six decades of underinvestment. This is especially true when over two-thirds of all surface transportation funding in the IIJA still went to highways, and the structure of programs for public transit, biking and walking, and passenger rail kept communities from taking full advantage of them.

To deliver better outcomes, communities around the country are demanding that Congress change both the amount and type of funding for public transit, pedestrian and biking infrastructure, and passenger rail in the next surface transportation reauthorization.



REAUTHORIZATION IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO INVEST IN PUBLIC TRANSIT

PROVIDE FEDERAL FUNDING TO OPERATE PUBLIC TRANSIT

Running additional public transit service has immediate benefits for communities: [more freedom](#) for existing riders, [fewer injuries and deaths](#) from car crashes, and more customers for [local businesses](#). More frequent service also allows more people to rely on taking public transit for more trips, relieving pressure on family budgets while making public transit systems more stable with their larger ridership bases. However, for agencies in metropolitan areas with more than 200,000 people, federal funding can be used only for capital projects, such as building new infrastructure, renovating existing facilities, and purchasing new vehicles. In order to help agencies run more service by hiring more operators or staff who maintain vehicles and other public transit infrastructure, we need a more balanced approach that includes local, state, and federal funding sources.

Congress must provide transit agencies with funds they can use to operate frequent, reliable service.

INCREASE PUBLIC TRANSIT FUNDING TO MATCH DEMAND

In the first half of the 20th century, public transit systems across the United States were the envy of the world, with extensive infrastructure, frequent service, and integration with dense land use. Although they were run by private companies that [many viewed](#) as “rapacious profiteers,” they provided over 23 billion annual passenger trips for [multiple years](#) in the 1940s. This is over three times as many passenger trips as took place on public transit in the U.S. [in 2024](#), despite the fact that there are over twice as many people living in the U.S. [now](#). The rise of the automobile and construction of suburbs contributed to this decline, but so did the federal government’s funding decisions. For about seventy years, the federal government has provided about four times as much funding to highways as it has to public transit. This status quo, known as [the 80-20 split](#) since the 1980s, has left much existing public transit infrastructure in disrepair, shrunk many bus networks significantly from their mid-20th-century peaks, and robbed transit agencies of the resources and stability they need to provide the service their communities need. Not only is there demand for [\\$36 billion more funding](#) for planned rail and bus projects than is currently available, but there is a transit state of good repair backlog of [over \\$140 billion](#).



Congress must end the 80-20 split and increase funding for public transit to match the demonstrated demand from communities around the country.

REAUTHORIZATION IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO INVEST IN PUBLIC TRANSIT

FIX EXISTING ROADS BEFORE BUILDING NEW ONES

Too many roads and bridges across the country are in a state of disrepair. A total of [29 states](#) expect to not meet benchmarks for road or bridge conditions over the next decade, including 11 states that expect both types of infrastructure to not meet benchmarks. And of the 33 states that report whether or not their spending will be sufficient to keep their roads and bridges in good repair, 24 report funding gaps that total over \$86 billion over the next decade, despite the fact that states received over \$400 billion for highways as part of the IIJA. But many states use these federal funds to build new highways and roads, or widen existing ones, instead of repairing their existing assets. This consigns many drivers to traveling most of their miles on potholed roads so a select few roads can be widened or constructed from scratch, [with little long-term impact](#) to travel times.



Congress must require that states prove their existing highways and roads are in a state of good repair before they use federal funds to build new miles of roadway and that states demonstrate they will be able to adequately maintain any new miles of roadway they do plan to build.

BUILD SAFE STREETS FOR ALL

From 2020 to 2023, over 40,000 people died each year on U.S. roads, reflecting a [steady rise since 2010](#) that brought fatality levels to their highest level since 2005. [Millions of additional people](#) are injured in crashes each year. These statistics reflect the fact that many of our streets and roads are currently [dangerous by design](#). The danger on our streets—and in particular the disproportionate rise in pedestrian deaths—also further corrodes public transit’s appeal, because every bus or train trip starts by walking or rolling to the stop. In the surface transportation reauthorization, Congress has meaningful leverage to change how our streets and roads are designed.

Congress must fully fund programs for pedestrian safety projects, direct DOT to issue stricter rules on protecting vulnerable road users, and require federally funded roads to be designed with safe facilities for pedestrians and bicyclists.

REAUTHORIZATION IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO INVEST IN PUBLIC TRANSIT

REVIVE OUR PASSENGER RAIL NETWORK

Through the 1960s, the U.S. had an extensive passenger rail network that connected communities around the country. In the decades since, this network has [shrunk and atrophied](#) to the point that frequent routes exist few places outside of the Northeast Corridor that extends from Boston to Washington, D.C. Without reliable intercity transportation options like passenger rail, public transit riders either find their travel destinations completely inaccessible or are once again obligated to own or temporarily rent a vehicle to get where they need to go. The IJA provided nearly \$100 billion [more funding for passenger rail](#) than the prior law, the 2015 FAST Act, [allowing new service](#) to start running, old routes to [restart service](#), and Amtrak to achieve [record ridership](#). But there are still many improvements to be made to regain the rail network of the 20th century.



Congress must establish a dedicated source of revenue for passenger rail, ensure that Amtrak's board of directors reflects the geographic diversity of the nation, and commit to building a robust network for the entire nation, not just the Northeast.

DELIVER INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS FASTER AND MORE AFFORDABLY

Infrastructure projects in the U.S., including both [public transit](#) and [highway](#) projects, cost more and take longer than projects in peer countries, despite often being less complex. There are many causes to this problem—such as [understaffed public agencies](#) and obstructive [permitting requirements](#) for public transit projects—and it creates a vicious cycle: Public confidence in public transit projects is undermined, reducing the likelihood that they are consistently and frequently funded and making it more difficult to successfully complete them when they are funded.

Congress must set infrastructure projects up for success by fully staffing the public agencies that oversee these projects, improving environmental review processes to reflect the environmental benefits of public transit, and requiring local governments to set up efficient permitting and other administrative procedures when they receive federal funding for public transit projects.

EXISTING BILLS CAN HELP ACHIEVE THE OUTCOMES COMMUNITIES WANT

Multiple bills introduced in the 119th Congress offer first steps to achieving these outcomes. Consider cosponsoring the following pieces of legislation as soon as they are reintroduced in the 120th Congress.

STRONGER COMMUNITIES THROUGH BETTER TRANSIT ACT/MOVING TRANSIT FORWARD ACT

Chamber(s): House and Senate

Leads: Rep. Hank Johnson/Sens. Chris Van Hollen and John Fetterman

Summary: The House version creates a new program that would distribute \$20 billion per year to public transit agencies for operating costs. This would increase the operating budgets of agencies around the country by around 30 percent. The Senate version creates a very similar formula program, but it does not specify a specific funding level.

Key Endorsing Organizations: National Campaign for Transit Justice (NCTJ), Transportation Workers Union of America (TWU), Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM), National Resources Defense Council (NRDC), Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS)

Links to Press Releases ([House Bill](#) / [Senate Bill](#))



GENERATING RESILIENT, ENVIRONMENTALLY EXCEPTIONAL NATIONAL (GREEN) STREETS ACT

Chamber(s): House and Senate

Leads: Rep. Jared Huffman/Sen. Ed Markey

Summary: Requires states to create plans for how they will maintain any new or expanded roadways before using federal funds for such a project. Also requires states to establish goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and vehicle miles traveled, and mandates that projects that increase roadway capacity help to meet these goals or include mitigation measures.

Key Endorsing Organizations: NRDC, Sierra Club, UCS, Transportation for America (T4A), NCTJ

[Link to Press Release](#)

EXISTING BILLS CAN HELP ACHIEVE THE OUTCOMES COMMUNITIES WANT

COMPLETE STREETS ACT

Chamber(s): House and Senate

Leads: Rep. Steve Cohen/Sen. Ed Markey

Summary: Requires states to use a portion of their federal funds to create a Complete Streets Program to help local and regional entities build safer streets. Also requires new construction and reconstruction to include Complete Streets elements.

Key Endorsing Organizations: Advocates for Auto and Highway Safety (AAHS), GreenLatinos, National Complete Streets Coalition, League of American Bicyclists, T4A

[Link to Press Release](#)



ALL ABOARD ACT

Chamber(s): House and Senate

Leads: Rep. Chris Deluzio/Sen. Ed Markey

Summary: Distributes \$200 billion over five years in order to build high-speed rail, expand existing passenger rail service, and electrify the most heavily polluting railyards and corridors.

Key Endorsing Organizations: AFL-CIO Transportation and Trades Division, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees Division-International Brotherhood of Teamsters (BMWED), Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen-International Brotherhood of Teamsters (BLET), Teamsters Rail Conference, TWU, IAM, United Electrical Workers (UE), Sheet Metal, Air, Rail, Transportation (SMART-Transportation), Sheet Metal, Air, Rail, Transportation Mechanical Division (SMART-Mechanical), International Brotherhood of Boilermakers (IBB), Transportation Communications Union (TCU), Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen (BRS), the American Train Dispatchers Association (ATD), the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)

[Link to Press Release](#)



EXISTING BILLS CAN HELP ACHIEVE THE OUTCOMES COMMUNITIES WANT

RESTORING ESSENTIAL PUBLIC ACCESS AND IMPROVING RESILIENT (REPAIR) INFRASTRUCTURE ACT

Chamber(s): House and Senate

Leads: Reps. Pat Ryan and Shomari Figures/Sens. Lisa Blunt Rochester, Jeff Merkley, and Reverend Raphael Warnock

Summary: Reauthorizes and expands USDOT's Reconnecting Communities Program, which is severely underfunded and oversubscribed.

Key Endorsing Organizations: National League of Cities, American Society of Landscape Architects, Congress for New Urbanism, Safe Routes Partnership, UCS

[Link to Press Release](#)

FREEDOM TO MOVE ACT

Chamber(s): House and Senate

Leads: Rep. Ayanna Pressley/Sen. Ed Markey

Summary: Builds upon successful fare-free pilots across Massachusetts to provide funding to establish public transit as a public good through fare-free services.

[Link to Press Release](#)

FASTER BUSES, BETTER FUTURES ACT

Chamber(s): House

Leads: Rep. Maxwell Frost

Summary: Encourages cities to modernize their bus systems by creating new grant programs to increase bus access and improve commutes through bus network redesigns, installing weather-appropriate shelters at bus stops, giving public transit agencies more say in street construction projects so that public transit is prioritized when roadway construction occurs, and adding additional funding to the Federal Transit Administration.

Key Endorsing Organizations: TWU, T4A, NCTJ

[Link to Press Release](#)





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ABOUT ALLIANCE FOR A JUST SOCIETY

Alliance for a Just Society (AJS) is a national center for innovative organizing and strategy based in Seattle, Washington. We build powerful organizations and communities. We fight for racial, social, and economic justice.

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