PUBLIC TRANSIT BRIEFING

FOR STATE AND LOCAL CANDIDATES

IOWA

ALLIANCE FOR A JUST SOCIETY

National Campaign for Transit Justice

PUBLIC TRANSIT BRIEFING FOR STATE AND LOCAL CANDIDATES

presented by

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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 pass hours of your life in traffic, have to spend thousands of 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 your doctor's office.

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

Voters recognize this. In every year since 2018, over three-quarters of ballot measures to fund public transportation have passed. And state and local elected officials have a wide range of opportunities to harness this popularity. Governors make appointments to state departments of transportation (DOTs), and those appointees can significantly affect state DOT priorities: Do they prioritize fixing existing roads, increasing transit construction, and operating more transit service in order to make transportation more affordable and build more economically vibrant communities? Or do they focus on widening highways and roads at the expense of road maintenance and every other mode of transportation and the communities that would benefit from them?

Together, governors and state legislatures decide how well public transit is funded, guide the work of state DOTs, and determine how much funding flows directly to local governments. Both state and local elected officials have significant influence over street design, depending on whether the state government or local government owns particular roads, and they often collaborate with federal elected officials to win federal grant money for bigger projects.

INTRODUCTION

Transportation in Iowa:

Annual Cost of Car Ownership: $12,297

2023 Traffic Deaths: 377

Percent of Pavement in Unacceptable Condition in 2024: 4%

Percent of People Over 10 Years Old Who Are Nondrivers: 31.65%

2023 PUBLIC TRANSIT RIDERSHIP –

Urbanized Area Passenger Trips: 14,453,178

Rural Area Passenger Trips: 2,790,958

Furthermore, local elected officials often have significant discretion over the delivery of locally controlled public transit services. **Given this power, candidates for state and local office have a chance to run on delivering improvements to public transit that are popular around the country, year after year.**

But in order to deliver improvements, it is important to look beyond the total amount of money spent. **When state and local elected officials pass transportation bills, it is imperative to judge their success based on the outcomes they deliver on the ground, not how many dollars they distribute.**

In the following pages, we describe why transportation is a kitchen-table issue, describe solutions that communities are seeking for their transportation problems, and highlight existing state and local policies that are models for other state and local governments to emulate.

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 are all deeply connected to how they get around. Future investments in transportation should be assessed on how they make life more affordable, improve safety, reduce pollution, and increase economic activity.

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. Research shows this burden is disproportionately felt by communities of color and working-class communities near highways. 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 even though 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 historically generate only $1.80 in economic activity for every dollar spent building them, despite their reputation as a driver of economic growth. And we are reaching a point of diminishing economic returns for highway investments, with more-recent studies showing 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.

Communities are demanding that state and local leaders improve their transportation policies

The transportation policies passed, funded, and implemented by state and local leaders 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 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 less than one-third of that total.

The underinvestment gets especially stark when looking just at the state and local level. From 2018 to 2023, two-thirds of states spent an average of less than $75 per capita each year on public transit. In most states, funding is limited not just in its amounts but in its sources. Just 17 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico allow state gas tax revenues to be spent on public transit. The remaining two-thirds of states have either statutory or constitutional restrictions preventing this revenue from being used to fund public transit. Furthermore, many states place significant restrictions on the ability of local or regional governments to levy taxes in order to fund public transit.

In order for public transit to succeed, communities around the country are demanding that their state and local governments invest in public transit infrastructure and frequent service, housing near transit, and transit-supportive infrastructure—such as biking, pedestrian, passenger rail, and intercity bus services that make public transit successful.

Communities are demanding that state and local leaders improve their transportation policies

IMPROVE PUBLIC TRANSIT SERVICE

Improving 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 by increasing their ridership. But in too many states, counties, and cities across the country, elected officials focus more on the once-in-a-decade capital project than the everyday schedule of local buses. A new public transit center, bus rapid-transit route, or even light-rail line may be flashy, but without the operators to run buses and trains, maintenance workers to take care of vehicles and facilities, and agency staff to coordinate operations, this new infrastructure is useless.

State and local governments must place just as much emphasis on running public transit service as they do on building public transit infrastructure.

FIX EXISTING ROADS BEFORE BUILDING NEW ONES

Too many roads and bridges across the country are in a state of disrepair. In Iowa, **4 percent** of pavement was in an unacceptable condition in 2024—and that's just the reported data. Those poor road conditions cost residents an average of **$336** annually, as everyday trips to work or the grocery store become trials to avoid hitting potholes. The more than **$1,471,557,425** distributed to Iowa through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) by June 2024 should have been a chance to eliminate this repair backlog. Instead, at that point in time, **$278,106,726** of that funding was spent on highway expansions.

State and local elected officials must fix all remaining miles of pavement on state and local roads in unacceptable condition before undertaking any expansion projects.

Communities are demanding that state and local leaders improve their transportation policies

BUILD SAFE STREETS FOR ALL

From 2020 to 2023, over 40,000 people died each year on U.S. roads. Each year, millions of additional people are injured in crashes. In 2023, **377** of those deaths were in Iowa. 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 and ends the same way. State and local governments, as the ones who design and build the most dangerous roads, have significant power to end traffic deaths and make sure that streets are public transit-supporting.

State and local governments must prioritize protecting vulnerable road users in their road designs and require that all roadways include adequate facilities for people walking or rolling and public transit when they are rebuilt or resurfaced.

REVIVE OUR INTERCITY RAIL AND BUS 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. For communities without rail access, the picture is similarly bleak: Researchers have found that U.S. cities lost over three-quarters of their intercity bus service between 1960 and 2010. Without reliable intercity transportation options like trains and buses, public transit riders either find their travel destinations completely inaccessible or are obligated to rent a vehicle in order to get where they need to go. The IIJA 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, and intercity buses continue to receive incredibly limited financial support from most states.

State and local governments must direct more funding to running passenger rail and intercity bus services, as well as the infrastructure that makes them possible.

State and local elected officials can achieve these outcomes with the power they already have.

Delivering these outcomes is easier said than done. Buses that don't run frequently enough, roads dotted with potholes, streets with reputations for danger, and once busy train and bus stations now sitting idle have not come to be by accident. They point to failures not solely by individual communities or states but also to the flawed structure of transportation funding and policy across the entire nation. As another surface transportation reauthorization approaches, Congress can and should change the federal policies that contribute to our current subpar outcomes.

But even without any changes from Congress, state and local leaders have more than enough power to make significant progress toward improved public transit, roads with fewer potholes, streets where nobody dies, and viable intercity buses and trains. Funding for public transit and the infrastructure that supports it will always need to be a three-legged stool, as it was in 2024, when federal, state, and local funding each accounted for about one-quarter of total spending on public transit (the rest coming from directly generated revenue, like fares). Yet strengthening the state and local legs of this stool does not require waiting for the federal leg to be strengthened as well. State and local leaders can and should use the power at their disposal to improve public transit and the walking, biking, and intercity infrastructure that supports it.

BUDGET LIKE YOU MEAN IT

In most states, the transportation budgets passed by state legislatures and signed by governors would indicate that those elected officials don't value public transit. Over the last several years, state and local governments have spent about 21/2 times as much of their state and local funds on highways as they have public transit. During that same time period, Iowa spent only **2.96 percent** of the funding it received from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) on bike and pedestrian projects. The disparity between the funding available to highways and the funding available for public transit and the pedestrian and bike infrastructure that supports it is not set in stone but is the result of decisions made each year by state and local officials. Furthermore, given the shoestring budgets that many rural and small urban public transit agencies run their service with, even modest state and local budget increases would help deliver significant improvements for riders and workers.

State and local elected officials must match their rhetorical commitment to public transit with their budgeting responsibilities and provide public transit with increased funding from state and local revenue sources.

State and local elected officials can achieve these outcomes with the power they already have.

FOCUS ON THE FORMULAS

In state and local governments across the country, discretionary grants from USDOT are a funding holy grail, allowing elected officials to pursue the irregular projects that can define their time in office. Unfortunately, these grants from the federal government are limited even under normal conditions. When USDOT is directly cancelling, or intentionally letting expire, grants it has awarded but not yet distributed, this is an even less likely source of funding. And given that the IIJA expires on September 30, 2026, there is added uncertainty for how much funding the federal government will make available through discretionary grants in 2027.

But state and local governments need not look for a discretionary holy grail when there are much more dependable cups of funding readily available: formula funding—programs that distribute money to states, with some set-asides for regional purposes, based on formulas that are determined by Congress. These sources of funding are ample. The State Transportation Block Grant Program (STBG), Carbon Reduction Program (CRP), Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Program (CMAQ), and even the National Highway Performance Program (NHPP) collectively distribute tens of billions of dollars a year to states around the country.

In addition to the predictability for road repairs this can provide, these programs, and more, can all be used to fund public transit projects. This funding could be used to increase capital budgets and even allow state and local funds to be used for operations funding. These projects that are currently relegated to waiting for either a discretionary grant or a new federal program in order to fund them have been eligible for the largest source of funding that USDOT distributes.

State and local elected officials must explore every option to implement their transportation policy goals from federal formula funding before turning to USDOT's discretionary grant programs.

State and local elected officials can achieve these outcomes with the power they already have.

DIRECT YOUR STATE DOT

No matter the transportation policy goals of a state or local elected official, they will almost certainly have to work with a state DOT. This agency is responsible for implementing the priorities outlined by a state legislature and governor, and their work often directly impacts the agendas of local elected officials due to the many rights-of-way that they own outright or are responsible for maintaining. But too often, state DOTs operate on autopilot. Due to the timescales at which regional and state-level planning processes occur, many projects being constructed right now were first conceived of decades ago. And no matter whether those projects—often road widenings and new road construction—are still a good idea, much less a good idea decades ago, the inertia of the state DOT maintains those priorities and professes the importance of taking these plans from paper to pavement, no matter the financial and human costs. Too often, state and local elected officials interpret plans as written in stone, rather than living documents that must be questioned and revised regularly to meet current needs.

State and local elected officials must ensure that their transportation policy goals are reflected in all of the projects and plans that state DOTs produce and implement.

MAKE INVESTMENT DECISIONS TRANSPARENT AND DATA-DRIVEN

One way to ensure that the projects pursued by state DOTs meet policy goals is to make the process by which state DOTs choose and distribute funding to local projects more objective and less political. In many states, this process is virtually impossible for anybody but planners and engineers to understand, leaving even elected officials with no meaningful way to engage in the process. This method can tend to select projects not for their importance to the transportation system or the quality of the project proposal but for their long-ago placement in master plans that may no longer be up to date.

State and local elected officials must work to institute more transparent and data-driven project selection processes.

Model policies from around the country are already helping communities achieve these outcomes.

Across the country, many state and local governments already offer examples of how state and local elected officials can move toward these outcomes. Consider writing, cosponsoring, and voting for legislation that is based on, or builds off of, these policies when you take office in 2027.

STATE: ILLINOIS' LEGISLATION TO FUND CHICAGO AND DOWNSTATE PUBLIC TRANSIT

In November 2025, Illinois passed SB 2111 to increase funding for public transit in both the Chicago area and downstate Illinois. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the three public transit agencies in the Chicago region were facing what a local transportation professor called "a dismantlement of much of the system." Lines on Chicago's metro system (known as the "El" for its frequently elevated nature) were set to either significantly cut back service or end it outright, the Metra commuter rail system was set to cut over half of its service, and more than half of the city's bus routes were at risk of being eliminated outright. To prevent this public transit death spiral, state legislators crafted a wide-ranging bill.

In addition to a reorganization of the governance of Chicago-area public transit agencies, changes to parking and development laws for public transit agencies across the state, and a myriad of other policy changes and earmarks, the most crucial part of this legislation is the funding it provides for public transit. The bill provided $1.5 billion in operating support for Chicago-area public transit and $129 million for downstate operators. As pointed out by public transit researchers, this will help public transit not just stay afloat but actually improve the service that it offers to riders.

LOCAL: BRAMPTON, ONTARIO'S FOCUS ON PUBLIC TRANSIT SERVICE

Across the United States, it is often presumed that public transit requires a certain type of urban form—walkable streets, high-density apartment or office buildings, historic commerce districts—in order to attract significant ridership. But looking at Brampton, Ontario shows that large numbers of people will ride public transit even if their communities are filled with wide roads, parking lots, and big-box stores, so long as that public transit service is good enough.

Model policies from around the country are already helping communities achieve these outcomes.

This suburb outside of Toronto grew its bus ridership by nearly 300 percent from 2004 to 2018 and had 225,000 daily trips on its bus network in 2024, while having a population of about 800,000 people. That is about seven times as many daily trips as Columbus, Ohio, and about twice as many as Orange County, California, even though they have 900,000 and 3.2 million residents, respectively. Although this increase was driven in part by a growing population, it was also driven by a near-doubling of rides per capita between 2005 and 2015. Furthermore, that increase in ridership per capita neatly tracked with the increase in the number of buses running and how often they were serving riders. They didn't accomplish this by focusing on one big project or waiting until skyscrapers were built across the city, but simply by running more buses.

STATE: MINNESOTA'S VEHICLE MILES TRAVELED (VMT) AND GREENHOUSE GAS (GHG) REQUIREMENTS

In 2023, Minnesota passed HF 2887. A broad transportation package, the bill simultaneously provided significant funding for roadways, increased the sales tax in the Twin Cities area in order to help Metro Transit avoid a fiscal cliff (and actually improve service, akin to how Illinois' legislation is set to help Chicago public transit not just survive but thrive), and also touched on bicycling, pedestrian, and passenger rail infrastructure. Most promisingly, though, HF 2887 placed the tightest restrictions in the nation on the road- and highway-building activities of the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT), as detailed in lines 107.7 to 110.10 of the bill text. If MnDOT wants to pursue a project that increases or reconstructs existing roadway capacity, it must first assess whether the project would be in line with the state's goals for reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and the number of miles people in the state have to drive, known as vehicle miles traveled (VMT). If the project isn't in line with GHG and VMT goals, then MnDOT can either change the project to be in line with those goals, include a number of mitigation measures in the area of the project, or just not pursue the project. As described in this summary, the state passed an additional piece of legislation in 2024 to strengthen HF 2887 based on the recommendations made by a working group formed to explore how implementation of the law would work. With these guardrails, MnDOT is more likely to prioritize maintenance of existing roadways and funding of non-road infrastructure than it was before.

Model policies from around the country are already helping communities achieve these outcomes.

LOCAL: COMPLETE STREETS POLICIES IN EL PASO AND MILWAUKEE

Local governments have significant discretion over the design of their locally owned streets and roads. However, improvements to pedestrian and bicyclist safety can often be implemented in ad hoc ways that leave a patchwork of safety infrastructure that limits the number of trips people feel they can safely take on foot, two wheels, or by public transit. A Complete Streets Policy can both result in a more complete network of this infrastructure, as well as a more comprehensive process by which to build it. In 2022, El Paso, Texas, passed a Complete Streets Policy that was one of best in the nation according to the National Complete Streets Coalition. Its clear vision and intent, connection to proactive land-use planning, and facilitation of coordination between city departments made it stand out. But although passage of these policies is an important first step, effective implementation is necessary to ensure that they go from paper to pavement. When it comes to implementation, Milwaukee is a national leader, setting an example for how to effectively and transparently communicate progress with clear success metrics and accountability measures.

STATE: COLORADO'S GHG PLANNING STANDARD

In 2021, Colorado passed SB21-260. Although this bill was wide-ranging and had significant positive impacts for electric vehicles and public transit funding as well, one of the most impactful parts of the bill focused on the planning requirements for the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT). Section 30 of the bill added requirements to state law that mandated CDOT and the state's metropolitan planning organizations "to take additional steps in the planning process" of projects that increase roadway capacity given their impacts on GHG emissions and VMT. Furthermore, CDOT would have to specifically work to achieve statewide GHG pollution reduction targets and include measures to mitigate air quality impacts of regionally significant projects. These elements of SB21-260 led to the adoption of CDOT's GHG Transportation Planning Standard in December 2021, which requires that CDOT and Colorado's five MPOs meet GHG emissions reduction targets at regular intervals through 2050. SB21-260 and this GHG Transportation Planning Standard have been credited with redirecting funding from two highway expansions in the Denver area into multiple public transit projects, although CDOT expects 37 percent of their progress on compliance to come not from changes to transportation but changes to land use and parking management.

Model policies from around the country are already helping communities achieve these outcomes.

To continue working to meet this standard, in 2024 CDOT adopted Policy Directive 14.0, which directs the department to use VMT, GHG emissions, and public transit revenue service hours as key performance indicators when choosing which projects to fund in the near term and which projects to begin bringing into their long-term pipeline.

LOCAL: DENVER'S SIDEWALK PROGRAM

After over a decade of community-led advocacy to make the 2004 Pedestrian Master Plan's sidewalk-funding mechanism a reality—and a 2019 report indicated that 40 percent of Denver's sidewalks were either missing or less than four feet wide, including 39 percent of sidewalks within a short distance of public transit stops—Denverites passed the Denver Deserves Sidewalks ballot initiative in November 2022 to move responsibility for sidewalks from private property owners to the municipal government. As detailed in information about the city's sidewalk program, the construction and repair of sidewalks around the city will be funded through an annual property tax, which will be a flat rate of $150 per year for 96 percent of property owners, including 99 percent of single-family homeowners. The city is currently in the process of developing a Sidewalk Implementation Plan through the end of 2026 that will provide a roadmap for how the funds raised through this fee will be used.

STATE: WASHINGTON'S COMPLETE STREETS MANDATE

In 2022, Washington passed SB 5947 into law. Section 418 of this law requires that any state transportation project with a budget of over $500,000 that started design on or after July 1, 2022 has to identify gaps that exist in the pedestrian and bike networks of project areas and work with local jurisdictions to fill them. The budget floor has since been raised to $1,000,000 for projects that started design on or after August 31, 2025. This requirement has already begun to pay dividends for individual projects, such as State Route 99 through Aurora, Washington, and as of May 2024 over 300 of the 800 highway projects in the Washington Department of Transportation (WSDOT) pipeline were set to include Complete Streets elements.

Model policies from around the country are already helping communities achieve these outcomes.

LOCAL: SUFFOLK COUNTY'S PROVIDING PARATRANSIT BEYOND ¾ OF A MILE

According to federal law, paratransit service for individuals with disabilities must be provided within a corridor that is ¾ of a mile as the crow flies from a fixed-route bus service. But in areas with limited fixed-route public transit service, this can leave many individuals with disabilities effectively stranded. In Suffolk County, the Suffolk County Accessible Transit (SCAT) paratransit system will provide paratransit trips between any two points in the county, even if they are more than ¾ mile from a fixed-route bus service (as indicated by SCAT's application form).

STATE: VIRGINIA'S "SMART SCALE" PROJECT SELECTION PROCESS

In many states across the country, local governments seeking state funding for transportation projects have to navigate an arbitrary and opaque process that is ultimately routed through the annual budgeting process of the state government. These processes often leave projects that would benefit public transit riders underfunded. In 2014, Virginia nearly unanimously passed HB 2 to create a statewide prioritization process for project selection through which currently 40 percent of the Commonwealth Transportation Fund is spent. Prioritization is based on six objective factors: safety, congestion, accessibility, land use, economic development, and environment. The process—named "System Management and Allocation of Resources for Transportation: Safety, Congestion, Accessibility, Land Use, Economic Development, and Environment," or "SMART SCALE" after these factors—now distributes funding across the state in a biennial cycle. In the first few years since adoption, there were significant increases in funding for public transit, walking, and biking projects.

LOCAL: THURSTON COUNTY, WASHINGTON'S REPRESENTATION OF NONDRIVERS ON LOCAL PUBLIC TRANSIT BOARDS

In recent years, board members of public transit agencies that serve cities like Atlanta and Chicago have been criticized for rarely or never riding the systems they oversee. As exemplified by a former president of the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) and the current general manager of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transportation Authority (WMATA), when the people in charge of a public transit system actually use that system themselves, it can make them more responsive to the needs and experiences of everyday riders. Thurston County, Washington is an example of how this principle can be applied to the broader community that public transit agencies serve. After receiving a carveout from the state legislature in the 1980s, the county's public transit agency, Intercity Transit, has had three community representatives serve on its board. Decades later, the role has not only provided a way for community representation but even helped regular public transit riders start careers in the field.

Model policies from around the country are already helping communities achieve these outcomes.

STATE: NORTH CAROLINA'S SALES TAX ENABLING LEGISLATION

In July 2025, North Carolina's government passed HB 948, also known as the P.A.V.E. Act. This bill allowed the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners to place a one cent sales tax on the November 2025 ballot, which was approved by voters. In order to begin taxing, Mecklenburg County will now form a new countywide public transit agency, which will receive 60 percent of the funding from the revenue, with 40 percent going to rail transit projects and 20 percent going to buses and microtransit. The remaining 40 percent of the tens of billions the measure is expected to raise will be devoted to roads.

LOCAL: LA METRO'S PUBLIC TRANSIT AMBASSADORS PROGRAM

The perception that public transit is unsafe is a significant barrier to ridership in communities across the country. But as explained by TransitCenter, simply providing safety through increased police presence can fall short of its promise to make riders and public transit workers feel safer, while also generating additional safety risks for the most vulnerable public transit riders. In response, many communities are developing public safety programs that acknowledge that a safe system can mean different things to different people. One such example is the Los Angeles Metro's Metro Ambassadors program. A pilot program started in September 2022, ambassadors are unarmed personnel spaced throughout the system who focus on providing high visibility, address locations with high customer complaints and concerns (including non-safety concerns, like ADA accessibility), and focus on public safety "hot spots." In June 2025, there were over 300 ambassadors and supervisors. Although working conditions have been subpar, including lower pay than counterparts at Bay Area Rapid Transit, the agency's plan to hire these positions in-house instead of contracting them out is set to alleviate some of these difficulties. Overall, researchers have found that the ambassadors play a key role in providing basic customer service and create a largely positive impact on the sense of riders' safety.

STATE: COLORADO'S BUSTANG INTERCITY BUS SERVICE

Although the federal government provides some funding for states to subsidize intercity bus service, only seven states—Colorado, Washington, Ohio, North Carolina, Vermont, Virginia, and Oregon—spend these funds according to explicit strategies.

Model policies from around the country are already helping communities achieve these outcomes.

Among these states, Colorado stands out for its Bustang service. Initially operated as a commuter-focused service starting in 2015, over the last decade, the state has funded a rural-focused network, seasonal services, and a significant service expansion on the busiest routes between urban centers. In FY 2025, ridership had increased more than 200 percent from FY 2016, with over 350,000 trips taken on the network. Importantly, this was conducted on what was effectively a shoestring budget. The most dramatic recent service expansion pilot—a doubling of service on I-25 and tripling of service on I-70 from May 2022 to December 2024—required only $30 million of funding from the state government. This is orders of magnitude cheaper than the state's concurrent effort to re-establish passenger rail along its spine of population density, providing a way to prove, and actually begin meeting, the demand for intercity transportation options before spending billions of dollars.

LOCAL: BOSTON'S BIKE EDUCATION PROGRAM

According to a 2017 report from the International Transport Forum, "Cycling can greatly extend the range of public transport options available to urban travelers." However, this potential is squandered if public transit riders don't know how to ride bikes. To address this possibility, the city of Boston runs four levels of workshops, ranging from basic skills (starting, stopping, and turning) all the way to classes that practice more advanced bike handling on low-stress city streets. In all classes, bikes and helmets are provided, and they all meet in the parking lots of public buildings. The only thing left wanting in this model is volume: There are only four each of the advanced and intermediate workshops, and just fourteen basic skills workshops (with eight reserved for women and gender-diverse adults) spread from June through mid-October.

STATE: VIRGINIA'S TRANSFORMING RAIL IN VIRGINIA INITIATIVE

In 2019, Virginia launched the Transforming Rail in Virginia initiative to advance the future of passenger rail in Virginia. This initiative builds on a decade of expanding passenger rail across the state—consistently exceeding ridership projections each time—after the federal government passed the Passenger Rail Improvement and Investment Act in 2009. The initiative started with the state announcing it would purchase nearly 600 miles of track or right-of-way from CSX, a Class 1 freight railroad.

Model policies from around the country are already helping communities achieve these outcomes.

The physical infrastructure projects are broken up into two phases that range from station improvements and the installation of third tracks all the way to significant public works like bypasses and a new bridge that will double intercity rail capacity over the Potomac River into Washington, D.C. Both of these more significant projects were able to receive additional federal funding through the IIJA. With this new physical infrastructure, there will be significant increases to both commuter rail and intercity passenger rail across the state. But even before these improvements are constructed, passenger rail ridership in Virginia has continued to set records in recent years.

LOCAL: DENVER E-BIKE REBATE

In addition to traditional bicycles, electric bikes (colloquially known as "e-bikes") have seen a significant increase in popularity. This is because they can cover longer distances with less effort than traditional bicycles, making them closer substitutes for cars. In order to promote their adoption, many state and local governments have started e-bike rebate programs that subsidize the purchase of an e-bike (and sometimes gear for the bike as well). Denver's program is a particularly successful notable example on a local level. Whereas the statewide program is available to all residents, the city's program is income-restricted and will combine its $450 with an additional e-bike tax credit offered by the state that covers 80 percent of the purchase price of a qualifying e-bike, up to $900. For people with disabilities who are unable to ride a standard e-bike, there is no income cap, and the city's rebate increases to $950. This rebate can also be combined with the state's e-bike tax credit to cover 80 percent of the purchase price of a qualifying adaptive e-bike, up to $1,400. As of October 2025, over 10,000 e-bike rebates had been redeemed since the city started the program in 2022.

STATE: MARYLAND TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT (TOD)

In 2023, Maryland passed HB 0012. This bill sought to facilitate the construction of transit-oriented development (TOD) projects, with the centerpiece being a Transit-Oriented Development Capital Grant and Revolving Loan Fund. This fund provides grants of up to $750,000 for local jurisdictions for design plans and non-revenue-generating public infrastructure improvements around TOD projects, as well as loans of up to $1 million to local jurisdictions for revenue-generating public infrastructure improvements and to developers for gap financing of TOD projects. After initially launching in February 2025, the first round of grants were awarded in June 2025, with two of the projects helping communities make the area around public transit stations more pedestrian-friendly ahead of significant expected TOD. The law requires that the state's annual budget restore the fund to at least $5 million at the start of each fiscal year.

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LOCAL: AUSTIN'S TOD WORK

Following the passage of a TOD ordinance in 2004 and the inclusion of $300 million in funding for anti-displacement efforts in the city's 2020 public transit funding ballot measure—Project Connect, which included funding to build a light-rail network for the city—Austin City Council voted to accept an Equitable Transit-Oriented Development (ETOD) Policy Plan in March 2023. This plan, described by the Eno Center for Transportation, was created in collaboration with CapMetro, Austin's public transit agency, and contains recommendations covering retail and community services, parking, and land use. In the months following acceptance of the plan by the City Council, several of these recommendations have been passed into city law. These include ending minimum off-street parking requirements for new residential and commercial developments (known as "parking minimums"), creating an off-street parking maximum for the downtown Central Business District and Downtown Mixed-Use District, and two phases of zoning changes, which first raised the number of housing units that could be built on a single-family lot and then decreased the minimum single-family lot size. While still being implemented, passing and beginning work on these policies before construction on any major transportation infrastructure could help maximize the benefits of these investments and minimize any harms that come from them.

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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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