

A transportation advocacy group advises that we should cut federal funding, as states often spend those federal funds on new roads instead of fixing our crumbling infrastructure. Every year the DOT says we need to bond again because of all the roads and bridges in disrepair, yet the DOT continues to squirrel away \$79.25 million for the new I-395/Route 9 connector project instead of spending those limited funds on Maine's unmet transportation needs:



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## T4AMERICA BLOG

News, press releases and other updates

### Why we are no longer advocating for Congress to increase transportation funding

3 Oct 2019 | Posted by [Beth Osborne](#) | [11 Comments](#) | [congress](#), [reauthorization](#), [transportation funding](#), [Transportation Policy](#), [transportation principles](#)

Since our inception in 2008, Transportation for America has always primarily advocated for reforming the federal transportation program. But raising the gas tax or otherwise raising new funding overall has also been a core plank of our platform since 2013. With the release of our brand new policy platform and principles coming this Monday, Transportation for America is no longer asking Congress to provide an increase in money for federal transportation program. Why?



For as long as I've been working in transportation and probably longer, the debate surrounding the federal transportation program has been a one-note affair: a never-ending fight over who gets money and how much money they get. Those who get money want more flexibility to spend it however they want. Those who get a little money want a bigger piece of the pie. And then both political parties come together in a "bipartisan" way to grow the pie and keep everyone happy.

This two-dimensional debate always leaves out an urgently needed conversation about the *purpose* of this federal transportation program. What are we doing? Why are we spending \$50 billion a year? What is it supposed to accomplish? Does anyone know anymore?

Nearly seven decades ago we set out with a clear purpose: connect our cities and rural areas and states with high-speed interstates and highways for cars and trucks and make travel all about *speed*. These brand new highways made things like cross-country and inter-state travel easier than we ever imagined possible. We connected places that weren't well-connected before and reaped the economic benefits (while also dividing and obliterating some communities along the way).

We've never really updated those broad goals from 1956 in a meaningful way. We've moved from the exponential returns of building brand new connections where they didn't exist to the diminishing, marginal returns of spending billions to add a new lane of road here and there, which promptly fills up with new traffic.

Why in the world would we just pour more money into a program that is "devoid of any broad, ambitious vision for the future, and [in which] more spending has only led to more roads, more traffic, more pollution, more inequality, and a lack of transportation options," [as I wrote](#) in the Washington Post during Infrastructure Week?

What the program *should* be about is accountability to the American taxpayer—making a few clear, concrete, measurable promises and then delivering on them. The program should focus on what we're getting for the funds we're spending—not simply whether or not money gets spent and how much there was.

Does anyone doubt Congress's ability to successfully spend money? We all have supreme confidence in their ability to spend hundreds of billions of dollars. Our question is whether that money can be spent in a way that accomplishes something tangible and measurable for the American people.

Taxpayers deserve to know what they're getting for their spending. Today, they don't, and nothing about the debate so far in 2019 with Congress has indicated that will change. So we've scrapped "provide real funding" from our core principles. T4America has concluded that more money devoted to this same flawed system will just do more damage.

## Coming next week: our new principles

With the conversation about money put behind us, on Monday we're releasing three new principles for what we expect this upcoming surface transportation bill to accomplish. We believe that whether Congress decides to spend more money or less, these three things should be paramount.

Every time federal transportation reauthorization comes up, we hear endless cries about the poor state of our crumbling infrastructure. How many bridges are structurally deficient, how poor our roads are, the long backlogs of neglected maintenance, the (severely inflated) costs of congestion, perhaps even a few voices about the alarming increase in people struck and killed while walking...the list of woes goes on and on.

And then, predictably, states, interest groups, members of Congress and others call for more money for the federal transportation program as the only logical solution, with no clear promises made for how this money will solve any of the problems outlined above or precisely what will be better or different after five years of spending yet billions more.

So let's stop limping along and spending billions with an unclear purpose and marginal returns. We need a clear set of explicit goals for the federal program. We'll be back here on Monday as we unveil our principles.



# POLICY PLATFORM

Principles for Infrastructure Investment

## It's past time to elevate the national conversation about infrastructure beyond just the price tag

We spend nearly \$40 billion in federal tax dollars every year, which fails to bring us equivalent returns. The more we spend, the more that congestion, emissions, and pedestrian fatalities seem to rise.

We spend billions while failing to address our most basic need: **getting people where they need to go safely and efficiently**. More money alone will not suffice without accountability for measurable or tangible accomplishments.

We need a new plan beyond "spend more money." Whether a standalone infrastructure plan or a multi-year authorization, T4America has **three simple principles** for any comprehensive federal investment in transportation:

*Click on any principle to go deeper on all three.*

### PRINCIPLE #1

## Prioritize maintenance

Cut the road, bridge, and transit maintenance backlog in half by dedicating formula highway funds to maintenance.

**Did you know:** States are permitted to neglect their basic maintenance needs in order to expand their roadway systems—and then rewarded with more funding.



PRINCIPLE #2

## Design for safety over speed

A serious effort to reduce deaths on our roadways requires slower speeds on local and arterial roads. The federal program should require designs and approaches that put safety first.



[www.t4america.org/platform](http://www.t4america.org/platform)

PRINCIPLE #3

## Connect people to jobs and services

Don't focus on speed. Instead, determine how well the transportation system connects people to jobs and services, and prioritize the projects that will improve those connections.



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These principles and expected outcomes will help us achieve measurable, tangible, concrete outcomes from the transportation program. We're used to not expecting measurable results from the dollars we spend. It's time to change that.

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# Guiding principles for transportation investment

## It's past time to elevate the national conversation about infrastructure beyond just the price tag

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We need a new plan beyond "spend more money." Whether a standalone infrastructure plan or a multi-year authorization, T4America has **three simple principles** for any comprehensive federal investment in transportation:

(click the image at right or [here](#) to download a sharable PDF of these principles)



## PRIORITIZE MAINTENANCE



If your house has a leaky roof, it's only prudent to fix the roof before building a new addition. Our transportation system is no different. In transit, formula funds are focused on maintenance, perhaps overly so. Roadway funds are not focused on maintenance, and **our roads are deteriorating, despite unprecedented high levels of funding**, including windfall funding from the 2009 Recovery Act. **States are allowed to spend more on expansion than repair**—which many states do—so merely adding new funding into these existing programs will not reduce our maintenance backlog.

### 🚧 Cut the road, bridge, and transit maintenance backlog in half

The next authorization should cut the maintenance backlog in half by dedicating formula highway funds to maintenance. In addition, when building new road capacity, agencies should be required to create a plan for maintaining both the new road and the rest of their system. This is common sense and is already required when building new transit projects. Roads should not be treated differently. On the highway side, it will be important to organize the program to better support repair. On the transit side, the program is organized well in terms of addressing maintenance needs but needs more resources.

With this approach, the federal government can halve the current backlog in six years under current funding levels. If funding is increased, they can do more.



## DESIGN FOR SAFETY OVER SPEED

Access to safe, convenient transportation is a fundamental right. Today, most Americans are denied this right because their roads—not just highways—are designed to move vehicles at the highest speeds possible, and roads are not designed for people walking, biking, or taking transit as a priority.

High speeds make sense on interstates and other highways, but fatalities occur when we design all streets for high speeds rather than to connect people and create value. Local and arterial roads must be designed to put safety first.

### 🚩 Save lives with slower, safer road design

A serious effort to reduce deaths on our roadways requires slower speeds on local and arterial roads. The federal program should require designs and approaches that put safety first.

Roads surrounded by development should be designed to serve those areas with speeds of 35 mph or under, as speeds under 35 mph dramatically decrease the likelihood of fatalities in a crash. Roadways through developed areas have lots of points of conflict (driveways and intersections, not to mention bicyclists and pedestrians). Protecting the safety of all people who use the street must be a priority reflected in the decisions we make about how to fund, design, operate, maintain, and measure the success of our roads.



## CONNECT PEOPLE TO JOBS AND SERVICES



The point of transportation is to get people where they need to go. Since the dawn of the modern highway era, we have used vehicle speed as a poor proxy for access to jobs and important services like healthcare, education, public services, and grocery stores. The way we build roads and design communities to achieve high vehicle speed often requires longer trips and makes shorter walking or bicycling trips unsafe, unpleasant, or impossible.

New technologies can now help us measure success by the primary thing that matters to real people: the ease of arriving at your destination. We can hold agencies accountable to deliver these connections.

### 🚩 Determine how well the transportation system connects people to jobs and services, and prioritize projects that will improve those connections.

Congress should require USDOT to collect the data necessary to develop a national assessment of access to jobs and services and set national goals for improvement.

With these data, state departments of transportation and planning organizations can ensure federal investments are effectively connecting people to economic opportunity. Funding should go to projects that will improve these connections, regardless of mode. State departments of transportation (DOTs) and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) should be held accountable by evaluating how well their investments help connect people to destinations.

These principles and expected outcomes will help us achieve measurable, tangible, concrete outcomes from the transportation program. We're used to not expecting measurable results from the dollars we spend. **It's time to change that.**