

Transportation Committee Policies & Priorities

Regional councils play a critical role in the nation's transportation system. They plan how the system will function in the future, provide for citizen engagement, and help set national and local transportation goals and priorities. Federal transportation legislation should reflect the importance of regional councils.

The National Association of Regional Councils (NARC) supports a multimodal federal transportation program that increases funding and authority for regional organizations and local governments. NARC supports Councils of Governments (COGs), Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), Regional Transportation Planning Organizations (RTPOs), and Rural Planning Organizations (RPOs) – collectively referred to as regional councils – and their role in transportation planning; project prioritization and programming; and promoting regional solutions that support economic growth, mobility, and environmental sustainability.

SURFACE TRANSPORTATION

The current federal surface transportation authorization law – *Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act* – provides funding for the nation's extensive network of highways, public transportation systems, bikeways, pedestrian facilities, and intercity passenger rail. Regional councils are central in the planning and programming of federal funds that support these investments.

Adequate funding for surface transportation is crucial, but in recent years has become a significant challenge. For decades, the federal Highway Trust Fund (HTF) was supported almost solely by fuel taxes, but since 2008 has required billions in General Fund transfers to remain solvent. Over time, increasing construction costs have eroded the purchasing power of the federal fuel taxes, which have not been increased since 1993, while improved fuel economy means drivers contribute a smaller share to the HTF. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates the HTF will require an additional \$160 billion in the next decade to maintain current funding levels. Without an increase in dedicated transportation funding, this so-called funding cliff will increase, creating a serious impediment to future reauthorization efforts.

As a result, the federal government is investing too little funding in the nation's transportation network and regional councils are faced with doing more with too little funding. The scope and complexity of transportation planning has increased significantly, including new performance-based planning requirements, rapidly changing vehicle technology, and changing job access and mobility needs. Additional federal funding, in particular to support planning at the regional level, would improve the capacity of regional councils to meet these and other challenges, and support local and regional economies through the multimodal movement of people, goods, and services. Federal assistance should also help regional councils promote livable communities by allowing better integration of transportation, economic development, housing, land use, and environment sustainability.

Recommendations:

- Maintain regional planning and programming as cornerstones of federal transportation policy. For more than a half-century, regional planning and coordination have created a multimodal transportation system and advanced the integration of urban, suburban, and rural interests.
- Strengthen local elected officials' role in transportation decision-making. The federal government should engage directly with local elected officials, who best understand their communities' needs, opportunities, and obligations. Specifically, Congress should increase local governments' authority to employ solutions at the regional level and provide regions and local governments the direct authority, flexibility, and funding to create a safe and efficient transportation system.
- Increase transportation funding at all levels of government. Appropriations bills should fully fund the levels provided in authorization legislation and Congress should provide additional funds to support all transportation modes. The BUILD discretionary grant program should be preserved.
- Increase and index federal fuel taxes in the near-term while exploring new revenue sources that will provide sustainable and predictable funding in the longer-term. Redundant and duplicative programs within the transportation program should be eliminated where appropriate.
- Encourage innovative approaches to transportation financing; allow federal funds to leverage other funding sources; and enable flexible and innovative local financing options, particularly for local matching funds. Explicitly allow regional councils to use and benefit from new financing mechanisms.

- Support goods movement:
 - Create a national, intermodal freight policy to improve the reliability and efficiency of freight movement and the transportation system overall.
 - Recognize the importance of freight and intermodal freight connections and the essential role of regional councils in issues related to freight movement. MPOs, RTPOs, and regional councils must be partners in the development of a federal freight program and any federal efforts to create programs to increase freight movement and efficiency, including access to funding.
 - Empower regional councils to prioritize freight investments within the context of transportation, economic development, and environmental planning and to promote connectivity across modes and access to the National Highway System.
 - Provide consistent, dedicated, and firewalled freight funding and suballocate these funds directly to MPOs or otherwise ensure regional councils are explicitly eligible to utilize this funding.
 - Allow for adequate construction and maintenance of the landside infrastructure that accesses the nation's ports and recognizes and funds planning and construction of intermodal facilities to support these operations.
- Support alternative modes of transportation. Provide adequate, dedicated funding for public transportation improvements from the HTF, including New Starts programs; revise federal requirements for local match and eligibility of federal funds for engineering work to eliminate the disadvantage between transit and highway projects; and provide robust, dedicated funding for bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure.
- Recognize regional councils as leaders in safety and security; address inconsistencies involving their participation in safety and security planning; and better incorporate regional planning into disaster and resiliency planning.
- Emphasize livable communities and encourage the integration of objectives involving transportation, economic development, housing, land use, and environment sustainability.
- Empower regional councils to collaborate and engage on planning efforts incorporating emerging data and intelligent transportation systems (ITS) technologies, connected vehicle technologies, and other smart mobility-related efforts (such as the federal Smart Cities Program), and ensure regional councils are explicitly eligible to utilize this funding.
- Continue federal leadership in data, research, and technology, particularly as they relate to the needs of local governments and their regional councils.
- Expedite project delivery and eliminate or consolidate duplicative or redundant processes; and recognize MPOs and RPOs as full partners in expediting project delivery.
- New sources of funding – whether derived from user fees, made available through the appropriations process, or as part of a separate infrastructure package – should, to the maximum extent possible, be distributed through existing funding channels with the greatest possible share going directly to local areas to decide how it will be spent.

NARC Supports Federal Surface Transportation Reauthorization That:

- Increases the overall funding levels of federal transportation programs. Congress should increase and index federal fuel taxes in the near-term and encourage the search for new and additional revenue sources – such as a per-mile road use fee – to provide sustainable, predictable, and adequate funding into the future.
- Increases the suballocated share of the Surface Transportation Block Grant Program (STBGP) and Transportation Alternatives (TA). Expand suballocation to include MPOs of all sizes.
- Recognizes the importance of non-metropolitan transportation planning by increasing funding and authority for RTPOs and RPOs and increasing their role in the planning process by strengthening their relationship with MPOs and state DOTs.
- Suballocates National Highway Freight Program (NHFP) funding to MPOs.
- Increases funding for metropolitan planning (PL).
- Provides flexibility in determining MPO boundaries.
- Requires MPO and RTPO representation on state Freight Advisory Committees.
- Increases flexibility within CMAQ to provide 100% funding for a wider variety of projects.
- Distributes a large share of the available funding through formula grants.
- Removes the current federal tolling prohibition, leaving states to decide if tolling existing Interstates is appropriate.
- Authorizes Regional Infrastructure Improvement Zones (RIIZs), a federal tax code change to allow businesses and individuals to make tax deductible contributions toward a regionally-approved infrastructure project.

NARC Supports Federal Transportation Implementation That:

- Results in rulemakings that are timely, thoroughly vetted, and well-reasoned.
- Recognizes the burden that federal requirements places on regional councils and MPOs, and works to implement each federal requirement in a manner that reduces this burden to the greatest extent possible.
- Maintains the autonomy of MPOs and considers the importance of locally-defined policies and priorities. Federal performance regulations should recognize the importance of multimodal connectivity; respect the balance regional councils make between a multitude of factors including cost, safety, resiliency, environmental impact, and community input; and should take into account the breadth of issues that regional councils are responsible for that are interwoven with transportation, including economic development, land use, and more.

AVIATION

Aviation programs enhance mobility; support regional economies and transportation needs; and serve as a catalyst for efficient movement of goods, services, and people. Regional councils and local governments can coordinate aviation activities with other land use, economic development, and transportation factors, and federal aviation policy should capitalize on this capacity.

Recommendations:

- Strengthen federal partnership with local governments and regions to address aviation issues.
- Engage directly with local elected officials, who best understand the local needs, opportunities, and obligations of their communities.
- Establish a robust partnership with local governments and their regional councils to more fully deploy Regional Airport Systems Plans (RASPs).
- Ensure regional authority in aviation decision-making; streamline the federal role in instances where local governments have the capacity to operate and maintain airport facilities; recognize local control of land-use decisions pertaining to air and noise pollution control; and increase authority to work in conjunction with airport operators to impose and enforce rates and charges and make decisions on revenue spending for airport development, capital financing, and operations.

NARC Supports Federal Aviation Authorization Legislation That:

- Obligates funds annually from the Airport and Airway Trust Fund without delay; removes the Airport and Airway Trust Fund from the federal unified budget; and uses it for dedicated purposes only.
- Provides robust and sustained funding for the Airport Improvement Program (AIP), which provides grant funding to public agencies for planning and developing public-use airports, and help build the capacity to handle future growth. Eligible projects include runways, terminals, and other enhancements designed to improve airport safety, capacity, security, and environmental impacts.
- Provides robust and sustained funding for the Essential Air Services (EAS) Program, which subsidizes air carriers that maintain a minimal level of service to certain small communities that might otherwise not receive air service.
- Provides robust and sustained funding for the Small Community Air Service Development (SCASD) Program, which provides assistance to enhance air service to small communities.
- Authorizes and expands funding for FAA airport capital development programs.
- Allows for the continued collection of passenger facilities charges (PFCs) by public agencies that control commercial airports, and increases the cap for PFCs for the nation's largest airports, to allow them to raise sufficient revenue to modernize their facilities appropriately.
- Prioritizes funding for airport projects consistent with RASPs.
- Provides sufficient funding to ensure security at commercial and general aviation airports. This funding should not be taken from other essential programs nor should the financial burden of security requirements be imposed on local and regional governments.

INTERCITY PASSENGER RAIL

Intercity passenger rail is a critical component of our nation's multimodal transportation system and contributes to the nation's economic well-being. Amtrak is the only intercity connection for many small and rural communities and supports corridors that are used by many local and regional service providers. Amtrak and other passenger rail are key elements of livable communities and emergency and evacuation planning, and provides a fuel-efficient way to connect communities and provide access to jobs and commerce. High-speed rail drives economic expansion and efficiently connects urban and rural regions, people, and businesses.

Recommendations:

- Support nationwide passenger rail service with sufficient and sustained funding for Amtrak and other qualified recipients, including higher-speed rail, allowing for maintenance and operation, modernization, and expansion to enhance service, promote safety, and improve economic development.
- Strengthen federal partnership with local governments and regions to address passenger rail and Amtrak issues, such as redevelopment of major Amtrak stations in central business districts and projects to ensure connectivity with local and regional transit systems.
- Engage directly with local elected officials, who best understand the local needs, opportunities, and obligations of their communities.
- Provide for regional-scale collaboration for the planning and expansion of passenger rail infrastructure, and support cooperative agreements between Amtrak and commuter rail systems.

NARC Supports Federal Intercity Passenger Rail Legislation That:

- Funds Amtrak and passenger rail to meet local and regional needs, including capital and operational needs.
- Establishes a sustainable funding mechanism to continue broad-based, nation-wide intercity passenger rail service, including funding metropolitan and non-metropolitan opportunities to expand rail service.
- Encourages and enables public-private partnerships to generate investment capital for rail infrastructure and operations, for example through the redevelopment of major rail stations.
- Invests in high- and higher-speed rail.

PORTS AND INLAND WATERWAYS

Ports and inland waterways are crucial to an integrated, intermodal transportation system; the nation's economic well-being; and protecting the homeland.

NARC Supports Federal Ports and Inland Waterways Legislation That:

- Provides long-term, increased funding for ports and inland waterways projects.
- Annually distributes all funds collected through the Harbor Maintenance Tax for harbor maintenance projects and allows for full utilization of the Inland Waterways Trust Fund.
- Protects the nation and its regions with proactive measures that increase the security – including cybersecurity – of ports and waterways.