



Influencing Federal Dollars for Clean Transportation

Advocacy Tool Kit

2023-2024

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Acknowledgments:

This tool kit was created to accompany the report: “Flex Your Grants: Leveraging Federal Dollars for Clean Transportation”. The Report was drafted by the Shared Use Mobility Center, commissioned by and in collaboration with: 1000 Friends of Iowa, 1000 Friends of Wisconsin, MoveMN, Resilient Cities and Communities, and Transportation Riders United.

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Purpose:

This tool kit is a grassroots advocacy guide so that everyday people can have more influence over how federal transportation dollars are spent in their communities and over transportation decisions in general.

Introduction:

The report, “Flex Your Grants: Leveraging Federal Dollars for Clean Transportation”, **analyzes both new and existing federal funding programs** and explains how state, regional, and local governments can **leverage these funds to invest in** public transit, biking, walking, and other clean mobility. The report explains and provides examples for potential funding sources including:

- Carbon Reduction Program
- Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program (CMAQ)
- Enhanced Mobility of Seniors & Individuals with Disabilities
- Environmental Justice Small Grants Program
- Promoting Resilient Operations for Transformative, Efficient, and Cost-Saving Transportation (PROTECT)
- Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods Grant Program
- Safe Streets and Roads for All

Some of the funding in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) is flexible, especially the formula funds – meaning States & Cities have some flexibility on what they can use these funds for. However, without input from everyday people, advocates, and organizations, many communities might not realize that they can use (or choose not to use) funding for low/no-carbon options. That means it is critical for us to make sure that our communities, regions and states are actually using these funds to reduce carbon emissions, especially for equitable, multi-modal transportation options, rather than the status quo. [Link to report](#)

In this tool kit:

- Who makes transportation decisions and decisions on how federal dollars are spent
- What kind of decisions these entities are making and how they make them
- Timelines for some of those decisions
- What the different avenues we have to influence decision makers on how federal funding is spent
- Examples of how everyday people have engaged decision-makers

I. Who makes transportation decisions in your state?

Every state and region has somewhat different ways of making transportation decisions, and it is important for a resident to get to know the major players in your state's transportation decision-making. Several entities generally have a leading role and are a useful place to start.

State Departments of Transportation (DOTs) – State DOTs are key players when it comes to federal and state funding for transportation. They have been given a lot of flexibility by the federal government to make decisions about transportation spending. DOTs can decide if they want to prioritize projects that reduce carbon emissions or safety; or if the priority is how fast can they move people with cars.

Each state determines how their DOTs are set up and run. DOTs follow the guidance and directives of the Governor and state legislatures, as well as the US DOT. Here is a link to more information about state DOTs from our friends at Transportation for America.

<https://t4america.org/community-connectors/who-is-involved/state-dot-101/>

Regional Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs)/Regional Planning Associations (RPAs)

-- MPOs are planning organizations focused in urbanized areas with populations over 50,000. They are set up so communities in a larger metro area can work together to make transportation decisions on a regional scale. Usually the board or commissioners are appointed by the Mayors or City Councils of member communities. They are made up of local elected officials, representatives from various transportation authorities, and sometimes representatives from large employers, institutions, and other relevant stakeholders. Though MPOs have staff that make recommendations, the Board/Commissioners are the ones that make the final decisions. Through this planning process, local governments can work to ensure their local transportation goals are included in the plan. Most MPOs will also have advisory committees that focus on certain aspects of the plan, such as a bicycle and pedestrian committee. These committees can influence some decisions.



Local Government – Local municipalities and counties can also be decision makers, though they are not necessarily controlling large funding decisions, they do decide things like whether or not they want to contribute to transit, if they should add bike lanes, how they design their neighborhoods – are they walkable and transit oriented, or car-centric? Counties also make decisions about county roads, bike trails on county level, and more. Both city and counties make decisions about growth, sprawl, annexations, etc – which all have a transportation impact – usually more roads.

II. What kind of decisions do these decision-makers make?

Public Participation or public involvement is a legal requirement of the transportation planning process. From goal-setting to prioritizing projects to environmental clearance, the public must have an opportunity to weigh in on transportation decisions. Each state is required to develop and public an official public participation plan, providing the opportunities they will make available for stakeholders and the general public. Thus reviewing the Public Participation Plan can be helpful in planning your involvement.

The federal requirements for a Public Participation Plan are specified in 23 U.S.C. The act clearly requires not only a documented process, but also implementation of the process for the state long-range transportation plan (SLRTP) and the STIP. As stated in 23 CFR 450.210 (a): “In carrying out the statewide transportation planning process, including development of the long-range statewide transportation plan and the STIP, the State shall develop and use a documented public participation process that provides opportunity for public review and

State DOTs – DOTs receive a mix of federal and state dollars. The amount varies depending on the state and the year. But the vast majority of funds that DOTs get from the federal government are formula funds that are flexible – meaning that they can use it on a variety of projects – not just highway expansion. Most states however, don’t use the flex options and tend to maintain the status quo with the funds, so it is up to us to impact those decisions. DOTs create a **State Long-Range Transportation Plan (SLRTP)**. This plan provides the long-range vision, policies, and decision-making framework that will guide investments in state transportation systems over at least 20 years. These plans are usually updated every 5 years through a 2-3 year long process of drafts and public input. The plans cover all modes of transportation. They can be influenced by state government priorities and earmarks. Though the Federal Government usually stays out of state transportation decision making, federal funding requirements can influence decisions. DOTs will gather public feedback prior to creating the plan. There are also opportunities to comment on the draft plan itself. DOTs also develop a **State Transportation Improvement Plan (STIP)**. This plan lays out all of the projects that the DOT plans to fund over the next 4-5 years based on the SLRTP.

MPOs – Similar to DOTs, MPOs also develop a **Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP)** that provides the long-range vision, policies, and decision-making

framework that will guide regional transportation investments over the next 20 years or so. They also develop the **Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP)** that lists the priority transportation investments pulled from the LRTP for the next 4 years in the region. MPOs also create a **Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP)** and budget annually. The UPWP identifies all

of the planning work and outcomes completed from the previous fiscal year and lays out all of the anticipated planning activities and outcomes for the new fiscal year. There are opportunities for the public to make comments on all of these plans. Read more on MPOs from our friends at Rails to Trails. <https://www.railstotrails.org/build-trails/trail-building-toolbox/planning/working-with-mpos/>

Local Government – Local municipalities and counties make land use decisions that impact transportation needs. They create **comprehensive land use plans** that identify areas of growth or how land will be used or protected. Through these plans, they may identify areas that they want to create high density, transit oriented neighborhoods, or they may identify areas of growth or sprawl and need more roads, a new highway/interstate exit or entrance ramp, etc. These plans can inform and influence long range transportation plans on the regional level. Local governments also create **municipal zoning codes**. These codes can dictate how our neighborhoods look and influence whether or not we have walkable, transit oriented neighborhoods or a car-centric community.

III. Avenues to influence decisions on how to spend federal dollars

Advocates should work at all levels and try to impact each decision maker. In many cases, the more local the decision maker, the easier it is to influence them. Even so, don't ignore the state DOT staff and commission.

Step 1: Sign Up and Show Up - Attend meetings or join a committee

- Get on the MPO emailing list to see meeting agendas, public hearing announcements, etc.
- One of the things we hear a lot from the MPO staff is that no one attends the meetings from the public. Local residents and advocates need to attend the policy board/executive committee meetings at the MPO and commission meetings at the DOT.
- Join an advisory committee or round table group at your MPO.
- Most public meetings include a specific time for public comments, giving you 2-3 minutes to share what's important to you. Some are less formal, and you can ask questions during the meeting.

Step 2: Identify who the decision makers are in your area

- Who are key staff at the State DOT?
- Who are the individual DOT commissioners/decision-making body and what do you know about them?
 - How were they appointed?
 - Where are they from?
 - What do they care about? In Iowa, one of the DOT commissioners is a farmer who is being encroached on by urban sprawl, so this has become a great avenue to engage them.

- Who are the staff at the MPO?
- Who are the members of the MPO policy making board or executive committee?
- What do you know about these people?
- Who is on your city council, what do you know about the mayor and City manager/administrator? What are priorities for the city?
- *But don't feel like you have to know everyone or everything to ask questions and share what's important to you.*

Step 3: Share the “Flex your Grants” report with decision makers

- Send the report to the DOT commissioners & MPO staff and board members.
- Share the report with urban planners in your area.

Step 4: Familiarize yourself with the Long-Range Transportation Plans, comprehensive plans, etc.

- You can find the LRTP plans on your MPO’s website or the one for your state on the State DOT website.
- Comprehensive plans will be on your city and/or county webpages.

Step 5: Make comments/Make your voice heard

- When our DOTs and MPOs are in the process of creating the LRTP, make sure you are making comments on these draft plans. Share what you like and offer areas for improvement.
- If these entities are soliciting feedback prior to creating the plan, make sure you provide it. Ask what their goals are. Ask how they'll measure success.
- Show up to public hearings. Bring friends and neighbors to echo your points.
- Where possible, provide alternatives and examples where similar communities have done the right thing.

IV. Examples of how to engage decisionmakers.

Attend coffee hours and open house events hosted by your elected officials - Many



local elected officials have monthly coffee hours or other public events where they want to hear what issues matter to their constituents. These are great times to share our report and talk about transportation issues that matter to you.

Set up coffees with elected officials – Local elected officials are usually willing to meet their constituents. So set up a meeting at a local coffee shop at a time that works for our council members. This image shows a small group of local residents meeting with the council person from their ward and the at-large member. To find the contact information for your city council members, go to the city website and click on city council. If you are meeting with county supervisors/commissioners, go to your county’s website. It is good to also go to your MPO website and



Organize a tour – Organize a tour with elected officials, MPO officials, or DOT officials to show them how you and your neighbors are currently impacted by the current transportation system and how using federal dollars differently can make a difference. This tour can be a walking tour or you can rent a van, or partner with your local transit authority for transportation.



Know your story – Nothing is more powerful than hearing stories from people who are directly impacted by transportation decisions. What is your story? When telling your story, think about how you are impacted, why this is important to you. You don’t have to be an expert – but know that you are an expert of your own experiences and your own story.



Seek out educational opportunities – Sign up for classes and webinars to gain more familiarity on regional and national transportation issues. Bring other advocates and encourage local elected officials to join. The classroom is a good place to meet other advocates and decision makers.



Show up to public hearings and testify – Often, when the MPO or DOT is preparing a new Long Range Transportation Plan, or the city wants to annex new ground to expand, there are opportunities for the public to speak. Far too often, the public isn't aware of these hearings. So when people show up and speak, it can have an impact.



Meet with DOT Administrators, commissioners, legislators, and Governors – don't



be afraid to set up meetings with high-level decision makers, such as the Governor or Lt. Governor (as seen in the photo from Transit Riders United). Governors and legislators can influence transportation policy by who they appoint to the DOT commission, through policy, through state earmarks and the budget process. Meeting with them can have an impact – but be prepared! Know your story, have a clear ask, ask

questions and be willing to listen. Listening to what they have to say can help inform your next steps in your strategy.

Do a letter and email writing campaign – Not everyone has the ability to meet with officials in person because of their jobs, family, or transportation situation so



sending letters and emails to decision makers is a great way to make sure your voice is heard. In the letter or email, make sure it is short and to the point. The shorter the better to ensure it gets read. Have a clear ask. Tell your story and why this matters to you. Have alternative solutions. Give them a way to follow up with you. Get your neighbors, your friends, and your family to also send letters or

emails.

For more information or to get more involved in transportation decision making – contact one of these organization in your state:

<http://1000friendsofiowa.org> (Iowa)

<https://www.detroittransit.org> (Michigan)

<https://1kfriends.org> (Wisconsin)

<https://www.movemn.org> (Minnesota)

<https://rccmn.co> (Minnesota)