

How SAFETEA-LU Successor Can Help Communities

BY SARAH A. KLINE
POLICY DIRECTOR

AND ALIA ANDERSON
POLICY ASSOCIATE

Each year, the Department of Transportation (DOT) invests billions of dollars in transportation programs that shape our communities and influence the way we live and travel. The debate over the next federal surface transportation authorization provides an opportunity to advocate for changes to DOT's policies and programs to help build a stronger link between the transportation investments funded by the department and the location of housing and jobs in the surrounding communities.

Reconnecting America is working to advance a number of policies in the authorization bill that would improve Americans' access to transit, fund planning efforts that integrate transportation and land use, and support the implementation of equitable transit-oriented development. Some of our key policy priorities in this area include:

Modify The Federal New Starts Program

The federal government's most important discretionary program for funding new transit investments is the New Starts and Small Starts Program. Demand for this program far exceeds its authorized funding levels. (See the newsletter article on the Transit Space Race on Page 8.) The federal transportation bill outlines a process by which the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) rates and prioritizes transit projects for funding. This process has been criticized for adding cost, uncertainty, and time to projects. In order to create a more

streamlined and efficient process for project applicants, the New Starts program should eliminate the redundancy between the Federal Transit Administration's Alternatives Analysis (AA) and the similar AA required by the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA). To advance those transit projects that will generate the most long-term benefits for regions and the nation, the New Starts evaluation criteria should elevate proposed projects that:

- Better connect job centers with transit.
- Are accompanied by regional or local policies that target community development funds toward the proposed transit corridor or station-area.
- Have plans or established policies in place that support the creation and preservation of affordable housing near transit.

Establish A Transit-Oriented Development Credit Facility Program

There are multiple barriers to the expansion of transit-oriented development, including the challenges associated with financing the infrastructure improvements that are often necessary to create successful TOD. Reconnecting America is working with several organizations to advance a proposal that would create a TOD infrastructure credit facility, through which the federal government would provide bridge loans or credit enhancements on local district-related financing used to construct critical local infrastructure and affordable housing in new and existing transit-oriented development areas.

Establish a Transit-Oriented Development Planning Program

Before a community even reaches the question of financing, there are numerous challenges to address in planning for TOD, including coordination among public agencies and private partners, and regulatory or other barriers to private investment in areas around transit. Reconnecting America has proposed a targeted federal grant program that would support development of specific, implementable TOD plans at the local or regional level. These locally-identified TOD strategies would help reduce red tape and increase coordination between the public and private sectors, reducing the cost and time involved in implementing TOD.

Include Station-Area Planning As Part Of High-Speed and Intercity Rail Program

Reconnecting America is working to preserve the high-speed and intercity passenger rail program so that more Americans will have access to quality transportation alternatives. But such access will require investment not only in the rail service and infrastructure, but also in the areas surrounding the stations to ensure affordable housing and community development takes place. We are working to ensure that any future rail program includes a focus on station-area planning.

Link Housing And Land Use To Innovative Financing Proposals

Given the gap between our nation's infrastructure needs and the amount of investment that the revenues coming into the Highway Trust Fund can support, the Administration and Congress are promoting various innovative financing programs that would leverage additional public and private sector dollars to help fund a variety of transportation projects. But like those projects funded with traditional methods, there is a risk that these "innovatively financed" investments will be made without

regard to their impact on local land use, housing affordability, and equity. Reconnecting America, with a team of other interested organizations, has developed proposals that would prioritize those projects that have a community development focus within any innovative financing program.

With limited fiscal resources at the federal, state, and local level, we must make smart decisions with the dollars that we have. For as long as the reauthorization debate continues in Washington, we will continue to make the case that federal transportation investments can have a profound positive effect on communities when they are made in concert with smart land use decisions that are aimed at providing all Americans with quality housing and transportation choices. ★

President's Corner . . .

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Amtrak request, and all of the HSIR program, is for infrastructure development.

The HSIR program could create 60,000 jobs, and the Amtrak appropriation would save or create a similar number of positions. So, between these two programs alone, we can save or create 110,000 jobs—and invest in infrastructure that makes the nation more productive in the long term.

The New York Times says it well: "Around China, real estate prices and investment have surged in the more than 200 inland cities that have already been connected by high-speed rail in the last three years. Businesses are flocking to these cities, now just a few hours by bullet train from China's busiest and most international metropolises."

America could use just such a boost. Tell your representatives in Congress to support Amtrak and the High-Speed and Intercity Rail Program. ★