



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES POLICY BRIEF

NACO National Association of Counties
2015

SUPPORT COUNTY SURFACE TRANSPORTATION PRIORITIES

ACTION NEEDED: Urge Congress to fix the Highway Trust Fund and pass a multi-year surface transportation authorization bill that provides long-term certainty and supports county surface transportation priorities.

BACKGROUND: Counties play a critical role in the nation's transportation system. They own 45 percent of all public roads (compared to the 32 percent of public roads owned by cities and townships, 19 percent by states, and 3 percent by the federal government) and 39 percent of the nation's bridge inventory, and are involved with a third of the nation's transit systems and airports that connect residents, communities and businesses.

The nation's transportation system is currently facing two looming policy crises: the expiration of the current surface transportation authorization law, Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21); and the declining solvency of the Highway Trust Fund. **Unless Congress acts, MAP-21 will expire and the Highway Trust Fund will become insolvent.**

MAP-21 passed Congress in the summer of 2012 following four years of short-term patches. While MAP-21 supported a number of county transportation priorities, like continued funding for off-system bridges, it also eliminated and consolidated several highway programs which reduced the funding available for locally owned highways and bridges by 30 percent. In addition, MAP-21 eliminated almost all discretionary programs for transit, making it difficult for local communities to pursue major transit investments.

The upcoming expiration of MAP-21 provides Congress an opportunity to reauthorize the federal surface transportation programs, make policy changes and set funding levels for years to come.

QUICK FACTS

- Counties play a critical role in nation's transportation system
- Counties own and maintain 230,690 (or roughly 39 percent) of all public bridges
- Counties own and maintain 45 percent of all public roads
- Counties own or sit on governing authorities that operate over a third of the nation's transit systems and airports

However, in order to reauthorize MAP-21, Congress must determine how to pay for it. The programs authorized by MAP-21 are primarily funded through the Highway Trust Fund, which collects revenue from a number of sources including the federal gasoline tax. The federal gasoline tax has not been raised since 1993. Due to several factors, including a reduction in vehicle miles traveled, increased fuel efficiency, and decreased purchasing power, the trust fund has faced growing shortfalls since 2008. Rather than addressing the trust fund's growing insolvency by raising the federal gasoline tax, or pursuing other alternative means of raising revenue, Congress has relied on transfers from the General Fund of the Treasury. As a result, the Highway Trust Fund will have insufficient revenues to meet obligations next spring.

Without a long-term solution for the Highway Trust Fund, MAP-21 will likely be extended through temporary measures. Counties need a strong federal vision and funding certainty to pursue long-range planning and major capital projects. Only being able to forecast federal funding in short increments holds up projects and often leads to reductions in public transportation services.

COUNTY PRIORITIES FOR MAP-21 REAUTHORIZATION:

- **Provide Long-Term Funding Certainty:** Support passage of a new surface transportation authorization that provides long-term funding certainty by raising the federal gas tax or finding alternative sources of revenue to make the Highway Trust Fund solvent.
- **Increase Funding for County Road and Bridge Projects:** Support county road and bridge projects by: 1) maintaining the set-aside for off-system bridges and continuing states' ability to reduce the set-aside requirement if there are insufficient off-system bridge needs; and 2) providing more funding for locally- owned on-system roads and bridges by increasing the overall funding level for the Surface Transportation Program (STP) and continuing the STP suballocation to local areas but increasing the share to greater than 50 percent.
- **Increase the Role of Counties in Statewide Planning:** Provide an increased role for counties in statewide transportation planning by: 1) requiring that state departments of transportation, at a minimum, cooperate with local government officials (including county transportation officials) in the development of planning and funding allocation processes, including the development of State Strategic Highway Safety Plans; and 2) requiring that state departments of transportation coordinate with local government officials in defining the term 'high risk rural road' – or developing a federal definition of the term 'high risk rural road' after considering input from state and local stakeholders and other performance measurements.
- **Build on Reforms from MAP-21 that Strive to Expedite Project Delivery:** Continue and expand efforts to streamline and expedite project delivery by: 1) maintaining the categorical exclusion for projects receiving limited federal assistance (\$5 million or less); and 2) simplifying the process for pursuing categorical exclusions.
- **Support Public Transportation Systems of all Sizes:** Support rural, small and large transit systems by: 1) continuing to fund transit programs through the Mass Transit Account of the Highway Trust Fund; 2) continuing federal funding for rural transportation systems; 3) continuing and expanding transit operators' flexibility to use federal dollars for operating assistance; 4) restoring historic funding levels for the Bus and Bus Facilities program and revising the program to require that all funds for Urbanized Areas with a population of 50,000 or more be apportioned directly to the designated recipients of 5307 funding; and 5) providing discretionary funding for both rural and urban transit systems to address one-time and/or major investments.
- **Make Safety a Priority on all Roads and Bridges:** Emphasize safety on all roads and bridges by: 1) revising the High Risk Rural Road (HRRR) safety rule under the Highway Safety Improvement Program, which requires an increase in existing fatality rates on HRRRs over a two-year period before a state must obligate funds to improve rural road safety – rather than waiting for safety problems to get worse, states should either be required or incentivized to decrease existing fatality rates on HRRRs through safety investments; 2) prioritizing investments for federal-aid bridges to address safety and infrastructure improvements for bridges with the greatest need – regardless of whether they are on or off the National Highway System; and 3) continuing existing limits on truck size and weight due to the enormous threat larger and heavier trucks pose to road safety and locally-owned infrastructure.
- **Support Innovative Funding and Financing Methods:** Continue and encourage alternative financing methods that help local governments stretch federal, state and local investments farther by: 1) continuing robust funding for the TIFIA program; 2) incentivizing innovative project funding and financing through an increased federal match (up to 100 percent) or by allowing local governments to use savings realized through innovative contracting methods toward their local match; and 3) creating a pilot program or providing technical assistance to local governments that support the planning for and design of multi- jurisdictional project bundling.
- **Invest in Passenger Rail:** Include funding for passenger rail in the reauthorization of MAP-21 that supports current rail service and the development of high-speed rail.
- **Improve Access to Tribal lands:** Continue funding for the Tribal Transportation Program to improve and maintain roads that are used to transport children to or from school or Head Start programs on or near reservations.

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