CountyNews HOT topics

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION *of* COUNTIES

OCTOBER 11, 2021

INFRASTRUCTURE

MT counties unite to revive passenger rail. **H5**

Commissioner Hausmann talks infrastructure. **H6**

IN FRA STRUC TURE

COUNTIES LOOK TO UPGRADE ROADS AND MORE

INFRASTRUCTURE
needs abound for counties

BY CHARLIE BAN SENIOR WRITER

For all the counties with all their varying infrastructure needs, the common theme seems to be water.

Treading water.

Years of deferred maintenance has left many counties feeling like making meaningful advances in their infrastructure systems is out of reach, particularly as some redefine the term as they rethink their systems.

"We'd like to move forward, but we face a backlog nearly everywhere we look," said Mary Jo McGuire, a Ramsey County, Minn. commissioner and NACo second vice president.

Voters support funding infrastructure improvements

From a wider perspective, there is cause for optimism. The American Society of Civil Engineers raised its grade for America's overall infrastructure out of the D range for the first time in 20 years, noting improvements in aviation, drinking water, energy, inland waterways and ports, with only bridges, for lack of a better term, falling.

But 11 measures, including some of the improvements, remained a "D" on the 2021 Report Card for America's Infrastructure. This was the first year that stormwater infrastructure was evaluated, and it too rated a D.

What did meet with approval? Voters' willingness to support measures to fund projects, to the tune of approving 98 percent of local infrastructure ballot initiatives in 2020.

That's a lifeline, but counties are still waiting on the House passage of the bipartisan infrastructure bill that passed the Senate and would provide $973 billion over five years, including $550 billion in new investments for all modes of transportation, water, power and energy, environmental remediation, public lands, broadband and resilience.

'We're just trying to catch up'

Lane County, Ore. Commissioner Heather Buch is a constituent of U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.), who is currently chairman of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure. She has followed the bill closely, with hopes for what some of that funding would mean for Lane County's needs. She is chair of NACo's Highways Subcommittee.

"COVID-19 affects everything, but we had so much backlogged maintenance anyway, that we're just trying to catch up, which makes this bill so important, let alone to move forward," she said.

Big picture, Buch's eyes are on the chance to connect the cities of Eugene and Springfield through the Glenwood neighborhood.

"It's a nice corridor but needs a lot of infrastructure investment to bring it up to new development standards," she said. "There's so much opportunity for business and housing there, but they lack the things that go underground to make that happen."

That development could be a force multiplier for the area, eventually paying for itself through the transformational development that could take place with those upgrades.

She also wants to explore development for a convention center in Eugene, eyeing large events and accompanying hotel additions that could make the central Oregon region a destination.

"Too often, people skip us to look north to Portland because we don't have the capacity," Buch said. "We have the scientific and athletic attractions at the University of Oregon to draw a lot of interest, but we can't support as many visitors as we'd like.

"Or they are fine with staying in Linn County for hotel rooms, so we're losing out," she noted. "A developed Glenwood would make it so much easier to keep people in Lane County."

Flooded sheriff's office, dilapidated museum

Milwaukee County, Wis. Executive David Crowley also wants to keep people coming to his county, and right now, he is worried about his museum.

"We're the owners of the public museum's artifacts, and we're on the brink of losing accreditation over how dilapidated it is," he said.

"If we lose that, we lose one of the things that makes our county distinctive… plus, we'll still be spending more to protect the artifacts."

A Milwaukee County without its unique features threatens its economic vitality.

"We're dealing with deferred maintenance across the board, and that means we haven't been able to invest in the parks and things that make this county a great place to be," Crowley said. "Our sheriff's office floods, so we need to make improvements to our public safety building just so it can function properly.

"Of course, we want to take care of the bread-and-butter features like roads and bridges, so that the workforce and the commerce that we bring here have a good experience," he noted.

"The more we can put into our infrastructure, the more we can go to businesses and say 'Is this where you want to do business?'"

Rural roadways

In rural Dunn County, N.D., Commissioner Daryl Dukart feels good about the pace of bridge replacement and repair but worries about the state of the county's 60 miles of paved roads.

"We're seeing the energy industry and the agriculture equipment getting bigger and wider, and truckloads are getting longer and heavier," he said. "We're seeing more and more accidents involving ag equipment and residents. Little misdemeanor things, but no fatalities."

No fatalities so far. Widening roads will help keep it that way, and those heavier loads will start to wear on the road surfaces faster than the engineers would have predicted when they were built.

Buch is seeing the same in Lane County, thanks to the longer and hotter wildfire seasons. Though central Oregon's economy grew from logging, now most of the trucks carrying trees are hauling cleanup loads of burned trees and the accompanying hazmat trucks.

"Our main arterial roads are being used extraordinarily more than normal because we have to do all these cleanup trips," Buch said. "That kind of heavy traffic was never expected for these roads. They're getting battered and won't be able to keep up — they need to be reinforced."

That's what Dukart is seeing from North Dakota counties who haven't been beneficiaries of revenues from the Bakken shale extraction boom.

"Other counties in the east aren't as lucky," he said. "They have a lot more bridges that need refurbishing or rebuilding. And a lot of those areas have greater needs for water development and broadband."

In Ramsey County, the smallest of the large urban counties, McGuire said planners are looking for the area of greatest impact.

"We have a ton of needs. We want to do it all, but we're very focused on housing," she said.

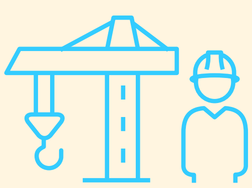
It's a back-to-basics move for the Minnesota county where people left out in the street during the winter face potentially deadly conditions on a nightly basis.

"We're focusing on housing affordability and the kind of housing that allows for services to be provided," she said. "We have the most concentrated areas of poverty in the state, and until we address that, we won't be focusing on the area of greatest impact for what we as a county can do. Why would we want these structures without the people working in them? We plan our infrastructure planning to put humans in there."

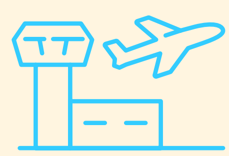
Of course, the pandemic has forced the county to reevaluate its hard infrastructure needs in terms of office space and what it needs to maintain or even own.

"Maybe we don't need all the buildings we did before," McGuire said. "We're reassessing everything we do." HT

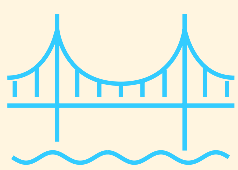
Counties lead our nation's infrastructure network:



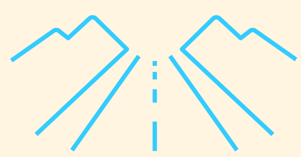
Counties invest $134 billion *in building, maintaining and operating physical infrastructure and public works.*



Counties support 78 percent *of transit agencies and* ***34 percent*** *of airports.*



Counties own and maintain 38 percent *of bridges.*



Counties own and maintain 44 percent *of public road miles.*

Montana counties unite to revive passenger rail efforts

by Charlie Ban
senior writer

Montana's Missoula County and Dawson County have 129,000 residents and 500 miles between them, and 120,000 of those people live in the former. But they also have something else that spans those differences: a drive to renew long-dormant passenger rail service on the south side of the Treasure State.

The Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority has already gained 17 participating counties before the coalition celebrates its first year in November, with communities big and small seeing the social and economic opportunities that will be within reach once the state diversifies its transportation infrastructure.

"This is an effort, a need and desire that transcends any party line or socio-economic line," said Jason Stuart, executive director of the Dawson County Economic Development Council, near the state's eastern border. "You have counties that are incredibly diverse, from tiny little rural counties with 1,000 people to the counties that count as 'urban' in Montana."

Stuart serves as the authority's vice-chairman.

"From the moment I came to eastern Montana, I'd felt the big divide and long-standing resentment toward the western part of the state, where all the political power and money is," Stuart said. "I've never seen an issue that unites east and west like this before."

There is rail service, the Empire Builder, running the width of Montana, crossing the northern part of the state on its way between Chicago and the West Coast. That's been it since 1979, when Amtrak canceled the North Coast Hiawatha line. Missoula County Commissioner Dave Strohmaier said there aren't as many residents who remember that service the way they once did and convincing a new generation of Montanans to believe that kind of service was possible was daunting before the authority launched in 2020. Strohmaier is chairman of the rail authority.

"Interest waxed and waned in the 2000s," he said. "Once there was a feasibility study, it came back with a big price tag, it took the wind out of people's sails. There was always enthusiasm for rail service, it was just subterranean."

The rail authority's composition looks to make a difference this time. A state law passed in the 1990s allows multiple counties to form their own rail authority. The authority has cast a net to 26 counties that were former passenger rail counties or counties that are adjacent to them, all good candidates for service restoration or expansion.

"The effort had been led for 40 years by passionate individuals, advocacy groups and municipalities, cities and towns," Strohmaier said. "What we lacked was the institutional, governance infrastructure to move an effort like this forward in a sustainable fashion over the number of years it will take to make this happen. The counties are making a difference, because by our nature, we work across jurisdictional lines to accomplish something bigger. We're contiguous in a way that municipalities, cities and towns aren't."

The potential return of rail service has enormous practical implications for many of the counties along its route.

"Look at the route from Glendive to Helena," Stuart said. "It's 450 miles, there's one way to get there and for four or five months out of the year, driving can be a dicey, difficult proposition. Getting to a doctor's office or the VA could kill someone."

When it came time for Dawson County to make its contribution to the rail authority, the total came from the county government, the city of Glendive and the Dawson County Tourism Business Improvement District.

"The hotels want people coming through town more and they'll pay to help make that happen," Stuart said. "They want to give people a reason to come and visit, explore, stay a few days or be a place to stay if someone is driving to town to board a train.

"One of the most popular places people travel is to Sandpoint or Coeur d'Alene, Idaho and this train would take them right there. Or to North Dakota or Minnesota to visit family."

With hopes high for funding from the proposed infrastructure bill in Congress, including $50 million for the Department of Transportation to conduct a nationwide study on restoration of long-distance passenger rail service and $2.4 billion for passenger rail enhancements, members of the authority anticipate some traction, particularly if they can win over remaining statewide officials. The effort already has endorsements from Sens. Jon Tester (D) and Steve Daines (R).

"It's time to strike while the iron is hot," Strohmaier said. "In my most wildly optimistic dreams, we're talking three-to-five years until we see things happening, but I don't want to be having this conversation in 10 years, waiting for another study."

In addition to the bipartisan consensus the plan has from its U.S. senators, Strohmaier sees some positive by-products coming from the rail authority's work.

"I've seen elected officials get together on this who wouldn't work together on anything else and it could be the start of a lot more regional cooperation," he said. "These relationships we're building are changing the way leadership works in Montana.

"This is a big bold initiative and goes well beyond potholes and zoning and the stuff that counties oftentimes deal with. It's a multiyear effort and something we haven't done before. I cannot think of an issue that has garnered as much bipartisan support as this."

It encouraged Strohmaier to see the more rural counties join the authority early.

"They're keenly aware of their demographics, they have an aging population and recognize that this has become a matter of transportation equity," he said.

Stuart said though passenger rail culture is centered in the Northeast states, it could very much become a way of life in southern Montana.

"It's easy to look at a big place like Montana and say 'not enough people live there to make rail service make sense,' but there are more people living along the southern line than did when they stopped service in 1979," he said. "This isn't going to get done just because 18 counties want it to happen, it's going to be a regional effort, it will be a regional collaboration."

People wait at the former Glendive, Mont. passenger rail depot in Dawson County. Part of the depot still exists and is in use by BNSF Railway. Photo courtesy of the Dawson County Economic Development Council

TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE: 'MUCH ON THE LINE' FOR COUNTIES

by Liz Hausmann

As a clearer legislative timeline for October begins to emerge, the fate of badly needed federal infrastructure investments hangs in the balance, and much is on the line for counties across the United States. Congress, of course, is deliberative by constitutional design and the legislative process is intended to allow for a robust exchange of ideas.

However, we can all agree that America's infrastructure is aging and in dire need of expansion, maintenance and modernization. America's counties are hopeful that Congress can compromise and ensure this historic opportunity to make the most substantial investment in America's infrastructure since the Eisenhower Administration does not pass us by.

Fulton County, Ga. Commissioner Liz Hausmann, chair of NACo's Transportation Steering Committee, addresses members at the 2021 Annual Conference. Photo by Denny Henry

Counties play a major role in America's transportation and infrastructure network. We own and operate 44 percent of public roads and 38 percent of bridges, more than any other level of government. At the same time, we directly support 78 percent of public transit systems and 34 percent of airports. Each year, we invest $134 billion in the construction of infrastructure and the maintenance and operation of public works. Our investment keeps our residents connected, allows for economic development and job growth and gets people where they need to go.

No matter the legislative vehicle Congress decides to pursue, at the local level, we know bipartisan solutions last. Our nation's physical infrastructure is deteriorating and causing real-life consequences for Americans, including serious safety risks, inefficient commerce and global trade implications.

As I stated earlier, America's infrastructure is aging. We are quickly falling behind other developed nations, and without action, we risk putting ourselves at a serious competitive disadvantage in the decades ahead. For example, the United States currently spends less than 1 percent of our GDP on transportation, while China invests approximately 10 percent. We cannot ignore that the need to invest in transportation infrastructure is becoming more and more urgent. It is time we invest in ourselves.

Delaying critical federal investments in infrastructure is felt most locally where resources may already be constrained. Unique to counties is the majority ownership of off-system bridges. Due to the location of these bridges off the National Highway System, they often suffer from chronic underinvestment and, as a result, can pose a serious danger to road users. In rural counties, these critical local connections can often serve as the only means of accessibility for residents. Congress must act to ensure that our nation's infrastructure is improved to ensure the health, safety and security of all Americans.

Let's talk about what improved transportation infrastructure actually means: It means economic development and job creation and providing opportunities to embrace private equity. It directly provides good-paying jobs that require education and training. It means launching "shovel-worthy" and not just "shovel-ready" projects. It means embracing innovation and preparing our infrastructure for fast-coming technological advances. It means fixing old assets while at the same time thinking anew, and it means doing all of this without raising corporate taxes.

Here in Fulton County and the 13-county Metro Atlanta Region, we are the economic engine of the South and we expect to grow by 2 million people over the next two decades. Unfortunately, our growth is hindered by some of the worst traffic congestion in the nation. To address this, we have done extensive planning to expand our transit system, including holding site visits with our county and city leaders to transit assets of other major metropolitan areas.

Additionally, our county has legislatively created a regional authority to coordinate efforts with existing transit agencies across the region. Unfortunately, we simply do not have the resources necessary to implement these plans alone and must rely on the intergovernmental partnership to meet the needs of not only our residents but the many travelers whose commutes take them through our local community each day.

Locally, we are especially pleased to see that investments in public transit continue to be at the forefront of infrastructure negotiations. For Fulton County and Metro Atlanta, expanding eligibility and increasing cost thresholds for our transit projects to access federal resources means continuing our growth and economic development.

Counties have long suffered with having to locally fund what, in actuality, are regional infrastructure problems. Financial constraints, heavy trucks, and extreme congestion are just some of the transportation obstacles that counties face each day. Local authority may stop at a county line, but our transportation challenges certainly do not respect those boundaries.

Rebuilding and modernizing America's infrastructure is a tall task that is too complex for any single level of government to undertake. Simply stated, counties cannot modernize our nation's infrastructure without the support and partnership of the federal government. We cannot afford to put off investing in America's infrastructure any longer. Congress must continue to work together to keep their commitment to delivering critical infrastructure investments for the American people. HT

Fulton County, Ga. Commissioner Liz Hausmann is chair of NACo's Transportation Policy Steering Committee.

HOT topics

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COUNTIES ALSO SUPPORT 78 PERCENT OF TRANSIT AGENCIES AND 34 PERCENT OF AIRPORTS

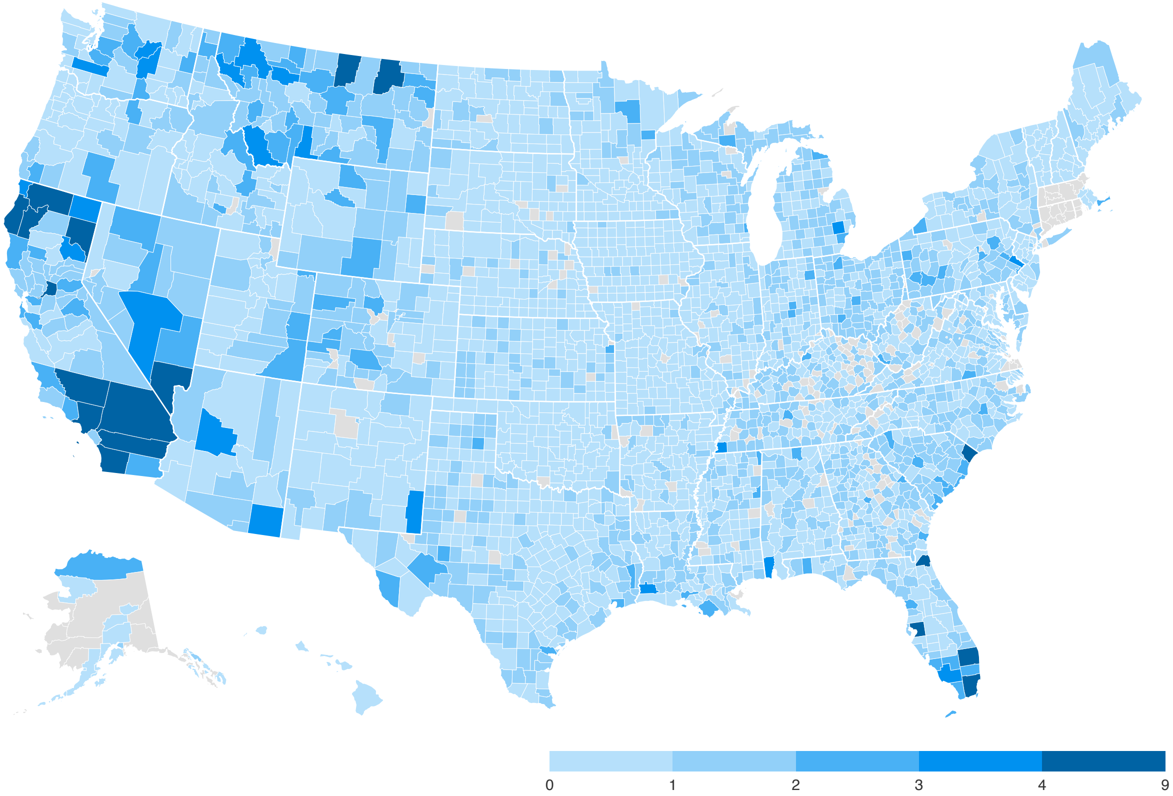
ANNUALLY, COUNTIES INVEST:

Over **$6 billion** in air transportation for the provision, operation, construction and support of airport facilities.

Over **$550 million** in the operation, maintenance and support of sea and inland port facilities.

Nearly **$474 million** to operate, maintain and support parking facilities.

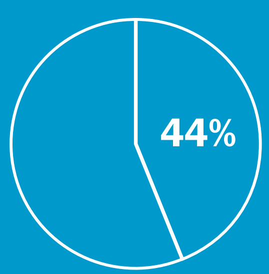
2017 County Airports



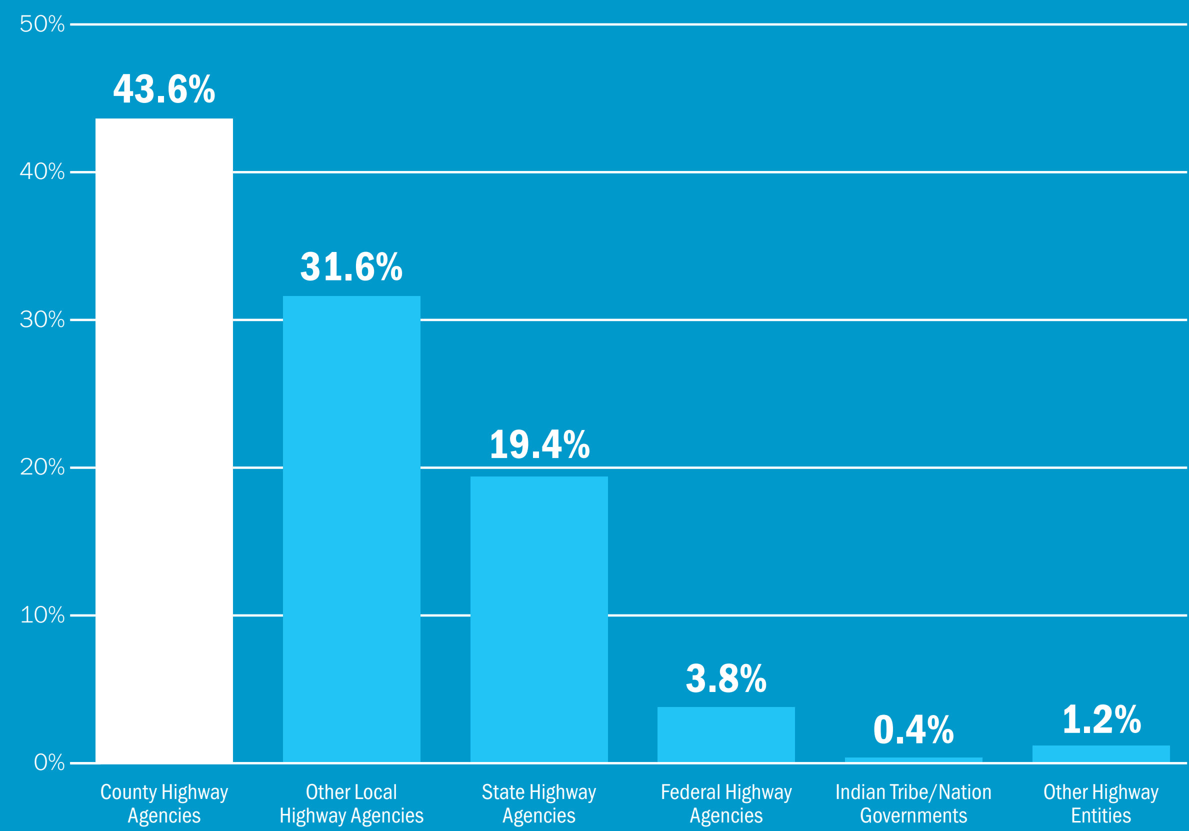
COUNTIES OWN AND MAINTAIN 44 PERCENT OF PUBLIC ROAD MILES

Breakdown of Ownership of Public Roads by Highway Agency, 2019

There are **4.1 million public road miles** within counties across the nation where the majority of trips both start and end.



Counties own and maintain **nearly half (44 percent)** of these road miles.



In total, local highway agencies including, cities, counties and municipalities, own and maintain **3.1 million road miles.**

Each year, counties invest over **$30 billion** in the maintenance, operation, repair and construction of toll and non-toll highways.

MORE THAN A PIPE DREAM

Harris County is experiencing frequent flooding, such as during Hurricane Harvey in 2017, pictured here. Photo by Getty Images

by Charlie Ban
senior writer

Sometimes a widened creek does the job to alleviate flooding. Perhaps a stormwater detention feature does the trick. Or maybe, if you're Harris County, Texas and facing massive floods every hurricane season, it's time to start thinking about digging enormous underground tunnels.

The Harris County Flood Control District is in year two of a study to figure out where larger tunnels could best divert millions of gallons of floodwater, saving lives and untold amounts of property damage annually. A successful 2018 bond measure gave the district $2.5 billion, but also an expectation that it could ameliorate flooding problems. The measure came on the heels of Hurricane Harvey, which dumped more than 1 trillion gallons of water on the county in four days the previous year.

"We were charged with being innovative, to come up with new technologies," said Scott Elmer, assistant director of operations for the flood control district. "The bond came with a high degree of trust that the citizens invested in us, it's something we have to deliver on."

The flat coastal region that Harris County calls home is dotted with bayous and wetlands that have demonstrated for millennia how hard it is naturally to move water away. Add in 22 different watersheds in the county and the hundreds of municipal and special utility districts responsible for managing development and the 34 different floodplain administrators and the flood control district can often find itself penned in by chaos, trying to move away excess water from Hurricane Harvey, Tropical Storm Allison and any number of heavy rains.

The region's development, notoriously unguided by zoning, only makes the task harder.

"Predicting future land use and development is not as easy when you don't have an overarching comprehensive plan of development," Elmer said. "There are a lot of constraints on implementing our traditional methods of flood control in a densely developed urban environment."

Tunnels aren't new to Harris County, but they've tended to be closer to 10 feet in diameter and 20 feet below ground. The tunnels in the district's study are closer to 45 feet in diameter and 120 feet below ground.

"We're getting to the point where the engineering and constructability of large-diameter deep tunnels have really advanced a lot in the last 20 or 30 years," Elmer said.

The first phase of the study determined that geological conditions work in favor of large tunnels, and they would be capable of carrying enough water to address the kind of flooding the region has seen recently. The study is currently determining which of those 22 watersheds would be best served with large tunnels.

"Some are more suited for traditional methods — detention facilities, channel widening, home buyouts, but what we're finding is in more highly developed watersheds, watersheds where flooding happens on a more frequent basis, tunnels start outweighing traditional methods," Elmer said.

"There's no denying the fact that tunnels are an expensive technology, but in general, we can deliver a tunnel quicker than a traditional program that would achieve the same level of benefits," he noted.

It's a long process, and one that won't show any performance improvement until completion, compared to traditional remediation methods that can be done incrementally, like creek widening.

"If you have no budget limitations and you start a tunnel today, you're still looking at 10 years until a finished project is in the ground," Elmer said. "But at the same time, traditional methods could take up 2,900 acres in what a tunnel could accomplish in 27 acres. That's a lot of property we don't have to acquire and take off the tax rolls.

"It's a much smaller footprint and much less of an impact to our citizens."

Similar tunnels have been successful in diverting excess storm water and sewage in Dallas, San Antonio and Austin in Texas and in Washington, D.C.

So far, the flood control district has funded studies with the Economic Development Administration and Community Development Block Grant funding, but the tunnel projects have been projected to cost $1.5 billion.

"If I had to guess 10-15 years down the road where we would be, it would be having a spine tunnel to start serving and getting relief and serving to bring branch tunnels to that spine where the water can empty out into bayous and waterways without negative impact," Elmer said.

"I honestly do believe tunnels can work in the Harris County region," he said. "I believe they provide transformational means of flood control. I believe that they are complex and they are expensive, but I think they will be one of the bigger tools in the future for us to utilize." HT

Counties use ARP funds to bridge digital divide

by Adam Pugh

Rural broadband is an issue that stretches far beyond political lines. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, when workers were sent home to work remotely, there have been constant examples of the critical need for investments in broadband, especially in rural America. If there is a silver lining to this pandemic, it is that the digital divide in this country demonstrates that the lack of broadband access puts our rural economies at a disadvantage as communities get left behind.

In July 2021, NACo's Broadband Task Force issued its report, "Broadband Task Force: High-Speed Internet is Essential for All Counties," emphasizing that access to affordable high-speed internet is one of the primary equity issues of our time. NACo Past President Gary Moore chartered the task force with the premise that "if you can't connect, you can't compete."

Under the American Rescue Plan Act (ARP) and the State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund, investments in broadband infrastructure are a priority of the program. In NACo's public comment to the Department of Treasury, we highlight that the Fiscal Recovery Funds are a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to enhance county broadband infrastructure to help us compete in the global economy well into the future. As we look to that future, designing and constructing broadband networks that employ numerous technological solutions and guarantee both redundancy and scalability should be the ultimate target. The advantages of creating future-proofed infrastructure are that economic, education and health care sectors will have the necessary "backbone" infrastructure to propel our rural communities forward for generations to come.

Counties that have utilized their recovery funds under the ARP on broadband expansion are dedicated to closing the digital divide and reaching our most underserved residents. A few examples include:

■ Hanover County, Va. recently approved $17 million in ARP funds to fund high-quality broadband access. The initiative, dubbed "Connect Hanover," will be a public-private partnership that will put fiber optic cables on existing power lines in underserved areas of the county. This project may begin as early as fall 2022 and offer speeds of 100 Mbps for both download and upload.

■ Eau Claire County, Wisc. approved investing $2.8 million on projects to help bring high-speed internet to county residents. The money is a massive step to help the county's Broadband Committee achieve its overarching goal of bringing high-speed internet to the whole county.

■ Trigg County, Ky. approved a public-private partnership for up to $2 million in ARP funds. The contract will outfit the entire county with consistent and affordable broadband service.

■ Miami County, Ind. pledged $1.4 million to fund a significant expansion of high-speed internet to rural parts of the county, including underserved students in low-income areas. As a result of ARP, the local internet provider now plans to install 800 miles of fiber internet and provide access to the public that only has wireless internet or no internet at all.

■ Kandiyohi County, Minn. will spend $1.3 million expanding high-speed broadband to its communities and providing fiber-to-the-home for 755 households.

County officials continue to play a crucial role as policymakers, funders, data aggregators, conveners and partners in pursuing sustainable broadband access, affordability and reliability solutions. By facilitating access to high-speed internet, county leaders are investing in the future of their local communities.

Adam Pugh is an associate legislative director at NACo for Agriculture and Rural Affairs and Environment, Energy and Land Use.

DOE launches challenge for communities to increase solar access

by Jack Morgan

SolSmart Program Manager Theresa Perry (center) poses with (l-r) San Miguel County, Colo. Commissioner Hilary Cooper, Elkart County, Ind. Councilwoman Tina Wenger, Santa Fe County N.M. Commissioner Anna Hansen and Yadkin County, N.C. Commissioner Kevin Austin.

The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) last month announced an ambitious new target for local governments to increase solar deployment and access: Sixty new SolSmart communities in six months.

Since 2016, the SolSmart program has provided local governments with free assistance and training to help become more solar-ready and streamline practices — such as local planning, zoning, permitting and inspection — that make it easier and more affordable for residents and businesses to go solar. Further, SolSmart provides national recognition for local governments who have taken action to advance solar through a bronze, silver and gold community designation process.

The cost of solar energy has declined 80 percent over the past decade. However, "soft costs," burdensome requirements and other red tape increase costs and discourage solar investment and development. Counties and other localities are uniquely positioned to shape and influence the prospects for solar energy growth.

By streamlining processes and taking other steps to encourage solar development, DOE and SolSmart are supporting counties to become "open for solar business."

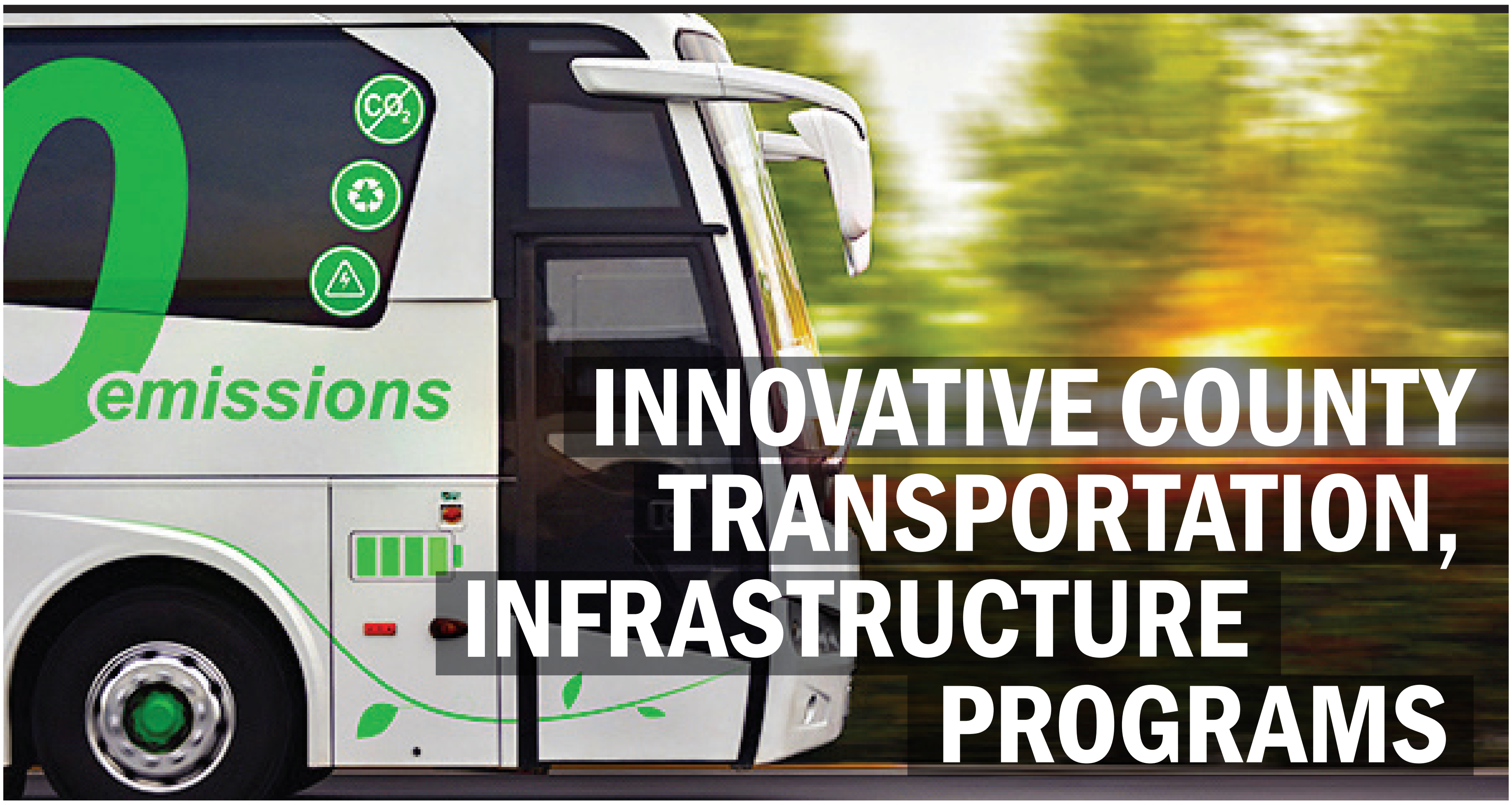
The 60 new SolSmart communities challenge follows DOE's successful Summer of Solar campaign, which signed up more than 125 communities for the newly developed, SolarAPP+ tool. DOE's National Renewable Energy Lab developed this free web-based platform to fast-track residential solar installation permits. The lab will continue updating the tool to include energy storage permitting and other resources. These efforts support the deployment of more solar energy to reach the Biden-Harris Administration's goals of achieving 100 percent clean electricity by 2035 and a net-zero economy by 2050.

"Everyone has access to sunlight but not everyone has access to solar power — this Administration is committed to changing that," said Secretary of Energy Jennifer M. Granholm. "DOE's SolarAPP+ tool and SolSmart program are helping communities tear down barriers to clean energy and unlock the health and economic benefits of solar. We are challenging communities to increase solar deployment and providing them the tools they need to succeed."

To date, 90 county governments have become more solar-ready and reached SolSmart designation. Recent SolSmart third-party evaluation and research found that SolSmart-designated communities added between 300-450 megawatts (MW) of solar capacity, which translated into $1 billion to $2 billion in additional solar investment. Research also found that local governments cited that one of the largest impacts of SolSmart has been increased knowledge about solar energy. Earlier this year, DOE announced a $10 million funding opportunity to expand SolSmart over the next five years and incorporate new solar-related technologies while emphasizing assistance for underserved communities.

To take solar action and meet the SolSmart challenge, please visit www.solsmart.org or contact Jack Morgan at *jmorgan@naco.org.*

Morgan is senior program manager, Resilient Economies and Communities at NACo.



INNOVATIVE COUNTY TRANSPORTATION, INFRASTRUCTURE PROGRAMS

Photo courtesy of Fairfax County, Va.

by Mary Ann Barton
editor

Across the country, counties are working to bring innovations to transportation and infrastructure programs that help county residents. Here's a sampling.

Electric bikes

In Colorado, Pueblo County will equip low-income essential workers with an electric bicycle as part of a new program aimed at providing reliable transportation options and reducing greenhouse gas emissions, the *Pueblo Chieftain* reported.

The Colorado Energy Office awarded $135,000 to the county through its Can Do eBike Pilot Program, enough to purchase 42 e-bikes which vary in price from $2,100 for a Class 1 model to $1,600 for a Class 2 bike.

That grant money doesn't require any matching funds from the county.

The idea is for the bicycles to act as reliable, consistent transportation for working people who may not be able to afford a car or who cannot rely on the city's public transportation.

Ferry system connects island to mainland

Sometimes, counties must advocate for funding of innovative solutions for county residents. In Hyde County, N.C., businesses depend on a state-run ferry system that takes tourists and residents to and from Hatteras to Ocracoke Island in the Outer Banks. Hyde County Commissioner Tom Pahl last week wrote in an editorial in the *Ocracoke Observer* that fully funding the ferry service is necessary to keep the region humming: "Revenue generated to State and Local government in the form of sales taxes, income taxes, property taxes and occupancy taxes is all tied to a healthy tourism economy – which in turn is tied to fully operating ferry service."

Electric buses

In a step forward toward a zero-emissions vehicle fleet, Fairfax County, Va. will buy new all-electric buses, trash and recycling trucks and a box truck using $4.4 million in state grant funds.

The money will go toward four electric Fairfax Connector buses, four solid waste trucks and one medium-duty truck, as well as installing electric charging stations for these vehicles. These demonstration projects will advance the county's efforts to electrify its fleet, helping officials learn more about operating and maintaining these vehicles.

"To cut carbon emissions we have to reimagine the way in which we travel," said Fairfax County Board of Supervisors Chairman Jeffrey McKay. "As a county, we are already actively moving towards cutting our emissions from our public transit and this will move us closer to our end goal."

Solar energy powering county buildings

Montgomery County, Md. encompasses 19 municipalities and is home to more than 1 million people. Christopher Brown, chief of Montgomery County's Office of Energy and Sustainability, said in the past five years, solar panels have been installed atop libraries, recreation centers and a fire station. In deploying the technology, Brown said Montgomery County aims to set an example for other counties and cities about the benefits of solar programs.

"Municipalities and counties know that solar is the wave of the future," said Warren Leon, executive director of the Clean Energy States Alliance. "They also want to encourage their residents and businesses to install solar. By putting solar on their own buildings, they are leading by example."

New York counties band together to procure electric vehicles

Albany County Executive Daniel P. McCoy last week made a major announcement with Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone for a new shared services partnership to procure electric vehicles together. Albany County now joins Suffolk and Westchester counties in a tri-county agreement that increases the combined purchasing power and will drive down the costs associated with transitioning the counties away from fossil fuel-powered fleets.

"Just last week, Albany County was designated a Climate Smart Community by New York State because we've demonstrated our commitment to preventing and preparing for climate change, including through our past investments in electric vehicles and charging infrastructure. Today, I'm proud to build on that progress by partnering with like-minded county executives through this innovative shared services plan," said McCoy.

"Through this plan, all three counties will be able to transition to 100 percent electric fleets no later than 2030. Not only will we cut our emissions through this plan, we will also be cutting the price tag, which will ultimately benefit our taxpayers. It's my hope that more counties will partner with us, and this progress will encourage those in the private sector to follow suit," he added.

Electrified roads? Michigan will start pilot program

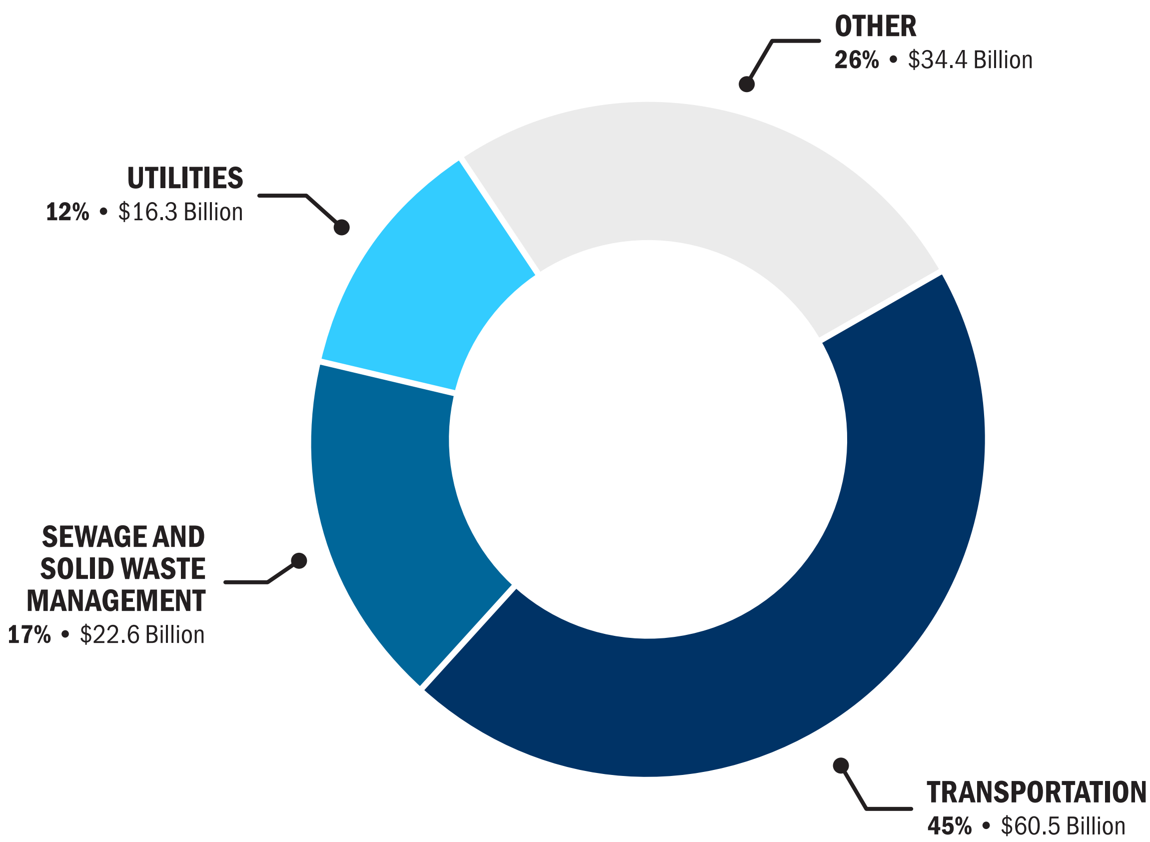
A one-mile stretch of road somewhere in Wayne, Oakland or Macomb counties will be picked to host the Inductive Vehicle Charging Pilot, according to the *Detroit Free Press.* The Michigan Department of Transportation was planning to issue a request for proposal late last month. It's not clear how the technology would work, how soon the pilot project would be operational or how much it might cost, although this type of advance has been discussed by experts as one possible future for EV charging and testing has been tried in Europe.

Gondolas

Tired of traffic? How about boarding a gondola instead? Proposals have been made for gondolas in unlikely places (not ski resorts) including Los Angeles County and Arlington County, Va. The LA proposal would connect riders from downtown to Dodger Stadium in about 7 minutes according to the company behind the project. In Arlington County, Va., a gondola going across the Potomac River would connect the county to Washington, D.C.'s Georgetown neighborhood, bypassing traffic. The idea has been the subject of countless studies for the past five years, but county officials are looking at more realistic plans such as extending metro or adding new bus lanes.

COUNTIES INVEST $134 BILLION IN BUILDING, MAINTAINING AND OPERATING PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND PUBLIC WORKS

Share of Total County Infrastructure Spending, by Category, 2017



Counties lead our nation's infrastructure network, investing in roads, bridges, airports, public transit and ports to keep America moving and our economy growing.

ANNUALLY, COUNTIES INVEST:

$61 billion in transportation infrastructure, such as roads and bridges.

$61 billion in the construction of public facilities, such as hospitals, schools, jails and other local institutions.

More than **$22 billion** in sewage and solid waste management.

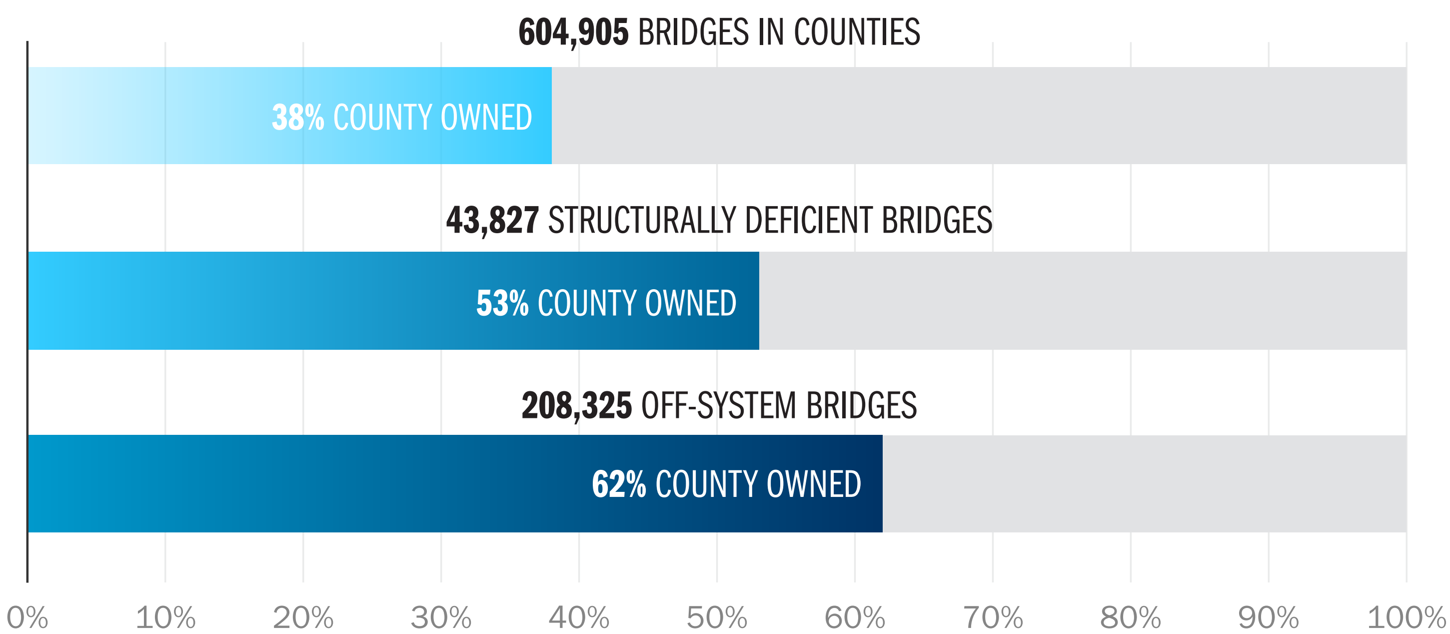
More than **$100 billion** in community health and hospitals.

$12 billion in building and maintaining parks and recreational facilities.

COUNTIES OWN AND MAINTAIN 38 PERCENT OF BRIDGES

Breakdown of County Owned Bridges, 2020

Counties own and maintain **38 percent** of the more than **600,000 bridges** that comprise the national bridge inventory.



FCC awards first round of connectivity grants

by Rachel Mackey

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) last month announced that it is committing $1.2 billion in grants to 3,040 schools, 260 libraries and 24 consortia under the Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) program. Authorized under the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, the fund provides competitive grants to schools and libraries to purchase laptop and tablet computers, Wi-Fi hotspots and broadband connectivity for students, school staff and library patrons who lack broadband access during the COVID-19 pandemic. County school districts and county libraries are among the recipients of these funds.

While the county role in local public schools varies across the country, all counties share a tax base with local school boards and provide complementary services to local students. Counties also play an active role in supporting and funding K-12 schools in five states including Alaska, Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee and support more than 1,000 libraries across the nation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the digital divide impacting counties across the nation, with rural and low-income students, in particular, facing barriers to remote learning. While many county governments have used local funds to provide devices, hotspots and other resources to ensure continuity in learning, the fund will serve as an important resource as NACo works with federal partners to implement long-term solutions that address the digital divide.

Rachel Mackey is an associate legislative director, Human Services and Education, in NACo's Government Affairs Department.

INFRASTRUCTURE RESOURCES

■ **Airport Improvement Program:** The AIP provides grants to public agencies for the planning and development of public-use airports. *faa.gov/airports/aip/overview/*

■ **Bike League:** How to create a bicycle-friendly community. *bikeleague.org/community*

■ **Broadband funding:** BroadbandUSA's federal funding site connects you to various funding opportunities that support broadband planning, digital inclusion and deployment projects. *broadbandusa.ntia.doc.gov/resources/federal/federal-funding*

■ **Department of Transportation grants:** Find out about grants at the DOT. *https://www.grants.gov/learn-grants/grant-making-agencies/department-of-transportation.html*

■ **Emergency Broadband Benefit:** The Emergency Broadband Benefit is an FCC program designed to help families and households struggling to afford internet service during the COVID-19 pandemic. *fcc.gov/broadbandbenefit*

■ **Emergency Connectivity Fund:** The FCC's Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) is a $7.17 billion program that will help schools and libraries provide the tools and services their communities need for remote learning during the COVID-19 emergency period. *fcc.gov/emergency-connectivity-fund*

■ **Environmental Protection Agency:** An important focus of the Water Infrastructure and Resiliency Finance Center is encouraging effective use of federal, state and local funds. *https://www.epa.gov/waterfinancecenter/effective-funding-frameworks-water-infrastructure*

■ **Federal Transit Administration:** Find out about grants at the Federal Transit Administration. *transit.dot.gov/grants*

■ **ROUTES Initiative:** Rural Opportunities to Use Transportation for Economic Success (ROUTES) is an initiative to address disparities in rural transportation infrastructure. *transportation.gov/rural*

■ **FRA CRISI grant program:** The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) grant program offers nearly $360 million for counties. CRISI grants can be used for highway-rail grade crossing improvement, rail line relocation and improvement and multimodal connection enhancement projects. *https://www.naco.org/fradot*

■ **SolSmart:** Helping counties go solar. *solsmart.org*

■ **County Explorer Report on Infrastructure:** Read the report here: *https://www.naco.org/county-role-infrastructure*