

TRANSFORMING TRANSPORTATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Virginia needs a cleaner, more equitable transportation system. Transportation is the state's largest source of carbon pollution, many roads and bridges need repair, and there are too few alternatives to driving — especially in marginalized communities. There has been recent progress in reorienting transportation around moving people, not just motor vehicles. However, state and regional transportation planning and funding continue to focus too heavily on highway expansion and construction — an approach that is costly to taxpayers, people's health, and the climate while doing little to relieve congestion in the long run. We need to transform this approach to favor cleaner, healthier mobility options that reduce traffic, strengthen our communities, and protect our environment.

CHALLENGE

Significant transportation reforms have been adopted in recent years, including increases in funding for transit, rail, and highway maintenance; the groundbreaking Transforming Rail in Virginia initiative; and the development of SMART SCALE to provide a more objective and transparent basis for selecting projects for funding. However, too much of our state and regional transportation funding continues to be spent on wasteful and damaging highway projects. Even accounting for recent transit and rail funding increases, roughly 73% of the FY2022-27 Six-Year Improvement Program is allocated to highways. This outsized investment in asphalt continues despite the fact that decades of studies and experience have shown that new and wider highways frequently fail to provide long-term congestion relief since they incentivize sprawling development and encourage people to drive more, thereby worsening the heavy traffic they were intended to fix.¹

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This asphalt-centered approach also has profound effects on our communities and environment. With over 85 billion miles driven each year in Virginia,² transportation generates almost half of all statewide carbon pollution,³ and communities of color and under-resourced communities bear a disproportionate share of the health burdens from transportation-related pollution.⁴ In addition, the number of pedestrians hit and killed by cars is rising, and there has been a disproportionate impact on people of color as well as people walking in low-income communities.⁵ Moreover, new roads destroy natural resources such as forests and wetlands, which absorb carbon and increase communities' resilience to sea level rise and flooding. New roads often do little to improve mobility and access for the hundreds of thousands of Virginians who do not own a personal vehicle and instead rely on other transportation methods.

SOLUTION

Meeting the climate crisis and improving the health, equity, and mobility of Virginians requires moving away from a transportation paradigm focused on ever-increasing asphalt. It requires focusing funding on maintaining existing infrastructure through a "fix it first" approach and shifting substantial amounts of our state and regional transportation budgets from highway construction to transit, rail, bicycle, and pedestrian projects, as well as telework. Such a shift is also essential for the Commonwealth to remain economically competitive. Affordable transit and other alternatives to driving can provide critical access to jobs, healthcare, and essential services.

Today's businesses increasingly seek to locate in walkable communities with good access to public transportation, with Amazon's location of its second headquarters next to two Metro stations just one of many examples.

In addition to shifting state and regional transportation funding, we need policy reforms to make pollution reduction and addressing climate change a central component of our transportation planning and funding processes. We must strengthen consideration of the climate change effects of transportation plans and project proposals (as well as the impacts of climate change on transportation) and ensure that state and regional plans serve to reduce — rather than exacerbate — emissions of greenhouse gases and other pollutants. SMART SCALE and regional prioritization processes must give greater weight to greenhouse gas emissions and climate change-related effects. In addition, the Commonwealth must set a specific goal of reducing vehicle miles traveled (VMT) by investing in alternatives to driving, and step up efforts to accelerate the electrification of vehicles and expand charging infrastructure for the driving we continue to do.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase the share of state and regional funding for transit, rail, bicycle, and pedestrian infrastructure to 50% by 2030.

Strengthen the "fix it first" requirement in Virginia Code § 33.2-358, to ensure that road funding first covers maintaining and repairing existing infrastructure.

Prioritize carbon pollution reduction in transportation planning and funding, including strengthening the review of climate change effects for major projects, requiring state and regional plans to cut carbon emissions and reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT), and increasing the weight given to climate factors in funding prioritization processes.

Apply prioritization standards similar to SMART SCALE to all regional funding and strengthening environmental review processes for local and regionally funded projects.

Set a specific goal to reduce statewide VMT by 20% from 2021 levels by 2050.

