

TRANSFORMING TRANSPORTATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Virginia needs a cleaner, more equitable transportation system. For decades, funds have primarily gone to road projects to the detriment of safer, healthier, and greener choices. As a result, transportation is Virginia's largest source of carbon pollution and there are few alternatives to driving, especially in under-resourced communities. Despite some recent progress, transportation planning and funding continue to focus heavily on highway expansion and construction. With significant opportunities coming to Virginia due to a wave of federal funding, we must defend recent progress and continue to transform our transportation approach to favor cleaner, healthier options that reduce traffic, improve safety, and protect our environment.

CHALLENGE

Significant transportation reforms have been adopted in recent years, including increased funding for transit, rail, and highway maintenance and the groundbreaking Transforming Rail in Virginia initiative. Additionally, SMART SCALE continues to provide objective and transparent basis for selecting projects for funding.

Decades of studies and experience have proven that new and wider highways incentivize sprawling development and encourage more driving, thus failing to provide long-term congestion relief.¹ Transit investments, in contrast, have been shown to provide a significant return on investment,² yet over 75% of the draft FY2024-29 Six-Year Improvement Program is allocated to highways.³ Efforts to weaken or sidestep SMART SCALE abound, including budget earmarks and proposals under consideration in the current review of the process being conducted by the administration.

Virginia's asphalt-centered approach has profound effects on our communities and environment. Transportation generates over half of all statewide carbon pollution,⁴ and communities of color and under-resourced communities bear a disproportionate share of the health burdens from transportation-related pollution.⁵ Moreover, new and expanded roads destroy natural resources such as forests and wetlands that absorb carbon and increase communities' resilience to sea level rise and flooding statewide. They also add to the maintenance costs taxpayers must cover. And they often do little to improve mobility and access for the hundreds of thousands of Virginians who do not own a personal vehicle.

SOLUTION

Meeting the climate crisis, spending tax dollars more wisely, 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 existing infrastructure through a "fix it first" approach and shifting substantial amounts of our state and regional transportation budgets from highway construction to public transit, rail, bicycle, and pedestrian facilities.

This shift is essential for the Commonwealth to remain economically competitive. 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.⁶

As federal funding makes its way into Virginia under the new infrastructure laws, we need to seize the moment to pursue competitive grants for cleaner, more equitable transportation - particularly for communities for whom car ownership may be out of reach or who are overburdened with historical and current pollution. We must also defend the data-driven, objective approach of the SMART SCALE prioritization process, which is currently under review, and extend those principles to other transportation funding decisions such as federal funding allocations and regional transportation funding mechanisms.

We also need to strengthen consideration of the climate change effects of transportation plans, proposals, and funding decisions and ensure that state and regional plans serve to reduce, rather than exacerbate, emissions of greenhouse gasses and other pollutants. In addition, the Commonwealth should set a specific goal for reducing vehicle miles traveled and step up efforts to accelerate the electrification of vehicles and expand charging infrastructure for the driving we continue to do.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Establish a statutory goal to increase the share of clean transportation funding to 50% by 2030 to expand mobility options, reduce pollution, and maximize clean transportation funding under the federal infrastructure law; in line with federal initiatives, 40% of funding should go to under-resourced communities and communities overburdened by current and historical pollution.

Strengthen "fix it first" requirements in Virginia Code and allocate funding to ensure that road funding first covers maintaining and repairing existing infrastructure.

Ensure SMART SCALE retains an objective, data-driven approach that promotes transparency and accountability in transportation funding decisions and opposes efforts to fund projects outside of the prioritization process.

Prioritize carbon pollution reduction in transportation planning and funding, including assessing climate change impacts of highway projects and their consistency with state greenhouse gas reduction goals, evaluating compliance with the 2020 Virginia Environmental Justice Act,⁷ and requiring state and regional plans to cut carbon emissions and reduce vehicle miles traveled.

Set a specific goal for VDOT and DRPT to reduce statewide vehicle miles traveled by 20% by 2050.