

# TRANSFORMING TRANSPORTATION

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## WHY IT MATTERS

Virginia urgently needs a cleaner, more equitable transportation system. For decades, transportation planning and funding have focused heavily on highway expansion and construction to the detriment of safer, healthier, and greener choices. As a result, transportation is Virginia's largest source of carbon pollution<sup>1</sup> and a significant source of other air pollutants. Communities of color and underserved communities bear a disproportionate share of the health burdens from transportation pollution.<sup>2</sup> In addition, new and expanded roads destroy natural resources—such as forests and wetlands—that absorb carbon and increase communities' resilience to flooding. They also add to the maintenance costs that taxpayers must cover, while often doing little to reduce congestion or improve mobility and access, particularly for the hundreds of thousands of Virginians who do not own a personal vehicle. Further, more than 900 people were killed in traffic-related accidents in 2023, and there was a 15% increase in crashes involving pedestrians,<sup>3</sup> highlighting the need to make our roads safer and provide more transportation choices.

Virginia's transportation system currently provides few alternatives to driving in most places, especially in under-resourced communities. There are numerous opportunities to leverage recent progress and transform our transportation approach to advance projects and policies that reduce traffic, improve safety, protect our environment and our health, and help communities withstand the impacts of climate change.

## CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Although 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, over 70% of funding in the state's latest draft six-year spending plan remains allocated to highways.<sup>4</sup> The emphasis on new and expanded roads has continued despite decades of studies and experience showing that new and wider highways incentivize sprawling development, encourage more driving, and fail to provide long-term congestion relief.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, transit investments have been shown to provide a significant return on investment.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, efforts to weaken or sidestep SMART SCALE, Virginia's nationally recognized transportation prioritization process, have continued. SMART SCALE provides an objective and transparent basis for determining which proposals receive funding and has helped advance cleaner transportation modes.

However, recent budget earmarks and changes to the scoring system skew more funding to highways.

Meanwhile, changes at the federal level have jeopardized investments in transportation electrification, hindering access to cleaner transit options and to safe, easy, and equitable charging opportunities along the Commonwealth's highways. Federal changes have also reduced the level of environmental and public health review for infrastructure projects.

## OPPORTUNITIES

Improving the health, equity, and mobility of Virginians, addressing the climate crisis, and spending tax dollars wisely requires prioritizing the safety, maintenance, and resilience of existing infrastructure and shifting the focus of state and regional transportation programs from construction to transit, rail, bicycle, and pedestrian projects. These changes offer substantial environmental, health, and equity benefits and are essential for economic competitiveness. Transit and other alternatives to driving can provide critical access to jobs, healthcare, and essential services, and businesses and workers increasingly seek to locate in walkable communities with access to public transportation.

Investments in transit, rail, and fuel-efficient vehicles already are paying dividends. Gasoline consumption is down by almost 6% since before the pandemic, even as vehicle miles traveled have increased.<sup>7</sup> Significantly increasing investments in cleaner transportation options would ensure an even greater return for our environment.

In addition, consistent use of the data-driven, objective approach of the SMART SCALE prioritization process, revisiting recent changes to SMART SCALE, and opposing attempts to fund projects outside of this process can ensure transportation funds are spent on projects that will have the greatest impact.

Consideration of the environmental impacts of transportation plans and projects needs to be strengthened as well, particularly in light of curtailed federal protections. Among other things, state and regional plans and projects should reduce—rather than exacerbate—carbon emissions and other harmful pollutants by setting a specific goal for reducing vehicle miles traveled. And state funding and programs should incentivize accelerated vehicle electrification and expansion of charging infrastructure for the remaining vehicle miles traveled.

Finally, our transportation system needs to be resilient to increasingly severe flooding and heat. This includes defending federal funding for this purpose,

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implementing Virginia's recently developed resilience improvement plan, and ensuring that design and construction standards for new and repaired facilities account for climate change.

## TOP TAKEAWAYS

Transportation is Virginia's largest source of carbon pollution, and the burdens of transportation-related pollution fall disproportionately on communities of color and under-resourced communities.

Transportation planning and funding focuses heavily on new and expanded roads that increase driving and pollution—harming our environment, health, and economy.

Substantial federal funding and policy changes increase Virginia's need to transform its transportation approach and focus on: fixing existing infrastructure and making it safer; improving analysis of environmental and health impacts of proposals; revisiting recent changes to SMART SCALE and prioritizing cleaner, more equitable transportation; reducing vehicle miles traveled; accelerating vehicle electrification; and promoting resilient projects and communities.

## ENDNOTES

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