

TRANSFORMING TRANSPORTATION

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WHY IT MATTERS

Virginia needs a clean, equitable, and more affordable transportation system. For decades, transportation planning and funding have focused heavily on highway expansion and construction to the detriment of safer, healthier, greener, and less expensive choices. As a result, transportation is Virginia's largest source of climate pollution¹ 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.²

Transportation is also the second biggest household expense after housing. With especially high car and fuel prices currently, four in ten Americans now say car ownership is a luxury they can't afford.³ Some areas of Virginia have good alternatives to driving long distances – mixed-use communities supporting transit and safe walking and biking. However, too many parts of the state lack meaningful alternatives to driving.

In addition, new and expanded roads destroy natural resources such as forests and **wetlands**, which 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, 825 people were killed in traffic-related accidents in 2025, and almost 6,650 people suffered serious injuries,⁴ highlighting the need to make our roads safer.

There are numerous opportunities to advance projects and policies that reduce traffic, improve safety, protect our environment and our health, and help communities withstand climate change.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Although significant transportation reforms have been adopted in recent years, including increased funding for transit, rail, and bridge maintenance and the **Transforming Rail in Virginia** initiative, highway projects still receive almost three times the amount of funds (\$21.1 billion) as rail and public transportation projects (\$7.4 billion) in the state's latest six-year spending plan.⁵ Most of that funding goes to new and expanded roads, rather than maintaining existing roads – as a result, Virginia was rated “Bad Spending. Bad Repair Conditions” for roads in a recent national analysis.⁶

The emphasis on construction has continued despite

decades of studies and experience showing that new and wider highways incentivize sprawling development and fail to provide long-term congestion relief.⁷ In contrast, transit investments have been shown to provide a significant return on investment.⁸

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, budget earmarks and changes to the scoring system in recent years have skewed more funding to highways.

Meanwhile, changes at the federal level have led to more polluting, less efficient vehicles staying on our roads longer and have hindered access to cleaner transit options and to safe, easy, and equitable charging opportunities. Federal changes have also reduced the level of environmental and public health review for infrastructure projects.

OPPORTUNITIES

Improving the health, equity, mobility, and budgets of Virginians, addressing the climate crisis, and spending tax dollars responsibly call for prioritizing the safety, maintenance, and resilience of existing infrastructure, and shifting the focus of state and regional transportation programs from highway construction to transit, rail, bicycle, and pedestrian projects.

Transit and other alternatives to driving can provide critical access to jobs, healthcare, and essential services. A mix of travel options also improves community resilience to disasters and disruptions. And businesses and workers increasingly seek to locate in walkable communities with access to public transportation.

Building more housing where Virginians want to live – near jobs, services, transit, and walkable places – can help address the current housing crisis and is an important transportation and environmental solution. Walkable, compact, mixed-use communities like the Mosaic District in Fairfax or Rocketts Landing in Richmond reduce driving distances and public infrastructure costs, boost transit ridership and economic benefits, and reduce development pressure on green infrastructure.

In addition, consistent use of the data-driven, objective approach of the SMART SCALE prioritization process, revisiting recent short-sighted changes to SMART SCALE, and opposing attempts to fund projects outside of this process can ensure transportation

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funds are spent on projects that have the greatest benefit.

The environmental impacts of transportation plans and projects should be better assessed and addressed, especially given curtailed federal protections. State and regional plans should reduce carbon emissions and other harmful pollutants by setting specific goals for reducing vehicle miles traveled and emissions, invest in projects that help meet these targets, and incentivize vehicle electrification and expand charging infrastructure for the remaining driving we do. Virginia's long-range and six-year

transportation plans should also include a roadmap for meeting the statutory goal of net-zero transportation greenhouse gas emissions by 2045.

Finally, our transportation system needs to be resilient to the severe flooding and heat increasingly occurring throughout the Commonwealth. This includes defending federal funding for this purpose, implementing Virginia's 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 climate pollution and second largest personal expense. The burdens of this system fall disproportionately on communities of color and under-resourced communities.

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

High costs and pollution mean Virginia should: fix existing infrastructure and make it safer; link transportation, land use, and housing solutions; improve analysis of environmental and health impacts of proposals; adopt vehicle miles traveled and emission reduction targets in transportation plans and invest to achieve these goals; revisit recent changes to SMART SCALE and prioritize cleaner, more equitable transportation; accelerate vehicle electrification; and promote resilient projects and communities.

ENDNOTES

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