

# One Regional Voice 2025:

## Northeastern Illinois and the Federal Transportation Reauthorization

One Regional Voice 2025 reflects the shared principles of northeastern Illinois stakeholders in the federal surface transportation reauthorization process. This diverse group of signatories includes regional transportation implementers, civic and advocacy organizations, labor partners, and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. Together, we are united in our support of a transportation system that works better for everyone, embodies the Safe System Approach, fosters a robust regional economy, and enhances quality of life for residents across northeastern Illinois. We believe the federal government can serve as a partner to deliver these priorities. Outlined below are the region's key priorities and guiding principles for the next federal surface transportation reauthorization legislation.

### **Regional support**

Active Transportation Alliance

Chicago Department of Transportation

Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning

Chicago Transit Authority

Cook County Department of Transportation and Highways

DuPage County Division of Transportation

International Union of Operating Engineers Local 150

Kane County Division of Transportation

Kendall County Division of Transportation

Lake County Division of Transportation

McHenry County Division of Transportation

Metra

Metropolitan Mayors Caucus

Metropolitan Planning Council

Pace

Regional Transportation Authority

Will County Division of Transportation

### **Robust, durable revenues**

Transportation reauthorization should be long-term and bring solvency to the Highway Trust Fund. Existing funding streams like the Motor Fuel Tax should be increased and indexed to inflation so that the Highway Trust Fund is restored as self-sustaining and not propped up by transfers from other funds. Any expansion of user fees to electric vehicles should not be punitive, charging these users no more than the gas-tax equivalent paid by other motorists. The federal government should also reward states that have increased and indexed state motor fuel taxes via changes to formula funding programs.

Looking to long-term sustainability in transportation funding, the next reauthorization bill should support the user fees approach. It should remove federal restrictions on tolling and commercial activity on the existing Interstate Highway System, allowing state and local agencies the opportunity to fund transportation projects consistent with regional needs and long-term priorities.

The reauthorization bill should continue and expand the Strategic Innovation for Revenue Collection program, allowing for more road usage charge pilot programs and research to explore the full potential of this technology, to include ensuring long-term solvency of the Highway Trust Fund. This work is necessary to better understand topics such as traveler personal data protection, driver charges for crossing state lines, technological solutions available, integration with existing tolling systems, and impacts across user profiles.

The next reauthorization bill should prioritize and retain statutorily defined apportionment formulas to ensure predictable and stable funding that advances National Surface Transportation Policy goals, including safety, infrastructure condition, congestion reduction, system reliability, freight movement, and reduced project delivery delays. Additionally, federal

formula funds should incentivize states to improve their performance in these areas and reward those that are doing more to achieve these policy goals. For example, eligibility criteria for formula funds could factor into applicants' performance records, rewarding jurisdictions that are doing more to achieve national goals.

Select federal formula funds should continue to be made available to local agencies through metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) to ensure funding decisions reflect local priorities, as these agencies have the most direct understanding of their communities' needs and challenges. This approach will be particularly important if a greater share of federal funding is delivered by formula programs. At the same time, competitive grant programs should complement formula funding by addressing gaps and supporting large, complex projects with broad national or regional significance. This balanced approach ensures smaller and rural communities have sustainable resources to meet local transportation needs, while providing states and MPOs with the necessary tools to achieve established performance targets.

Finally, the next reauthorization bill can amplify the impact of federal funding by accelerating project delivery. By allowing state and local agencies to develop and implement projects more quickly, the purchasing power of federal investments is effectively increased, delivering more projects to the traveling public for the same dollar. Better coordinating reviews across federal agencies, issuing permits more quickly, and combining grant review and environmental clearance processes can help to save time and money. But efforts to streamline project delivery must not sacrifice environmental quality or place undue burden on state and local agencies. Adequate staffing at the U.S. Department of Transportation and its modal agencies is critical to the success of transportation projects and supports timely project delivery. Both rural and urban areas benefit from federal staff with transportation expertise who can help navigate permitting and grant processes efficiently.

### **Enhanced safety**

Reauthorization should expand upon the national goal to promote safety by encouraging states and local governments to adopt the Safe System Approach — a comprehensive framework that addresses physical infrastructure, operational policies, and traveler behavior to improve safety. The federal government can continue the Safe Streets and Roads for All program and similar planning efforts, which leverage data-driven analyses and the professional judgment of state, local, and private-sector perspectives to customize strategies that address high-priority crash locations.

In addition, the reauthorization bill should encourage the adoption of designs that prevent crashes and prioritize vulnerable roadway users. Federal policies should incentivize local experimentation in implementing new design strategies that improve safety outcomes, including relatively low cost quick build approaches. Sharing results from such pilot projects should be required so that these innovations can provide a feedback loop to inform federal policies.

Regions have a key role to play in both planning and programming for safety improvements. The next reauthorization bill should increase and expand funding for safety initiatives, ensuring that state departments of transportation, MPOs, and local agencies have the resources needed to develop and implement comprehensive safety plans. By aligning funding with local priorities and needs, reauthorization can help reduce serious injuries and fatalities while advancing the Safe System Approach. Recognizing that improvements in safety rely on many factors, reauthorization should provide state and local agencies with the flexibility to support all potential solutions, including capital improvements, educational awareness, and enforcement. In support of these multifaceted efforts, reauthorization should improve collection methods for crash data, including new partnerships across federal, state, and local agencies. It should also ensure transparent public access to connected and automated vehicle safety data.

### **Efficient public transportation and passenger rail**

Federal support for mass transit is critical to sustaining the nation's economic vitality, particularly in key nodes of economic activity. Only transit can efficiently connect large numbers of workers to jobs, children to schools, and families to healthcare and other daily needs in the nation's largest metropolitan areas. Federal investment is required to ensure safety and security for transit riders and workers, keep transit assets in good repair, and provide frequent, reliable service — all of which supports a cycle of continued ridership growth and service expansion.

Support for the transit system within the Highway Trust Fund should be maintained and enhanced to account for the impacts of inflation. In addition, the existing authority to transfer resources between highway and transit funding programs should be maintained. Current formula and discretionary capital programs should be maintained for mass transit systems with the greatest infrastructure needs and highest number of passengers. Advance appropriations for mass transit capital should also be preserved to provide funding certainty for large-scale projects.

Our region supports new revenue sources for the federal transportation program. Any new revenue sources directed to the Highway Trust Fund should preserve transit's traditional 20 percent share of funding, which is a critical underpinning of economic activity in large and mid-size metropolitan areas.

There should also be additional federal support to large metropolitan transit systems' operating costs, similar to what federal law permits for smaller transit agencies. Federal requirements that create funding disparities between transit projects and highway projects should be eliminated, such as requirements for higher shares of non-federal matching funds and completion of early project development work for transit projects. Additionally, reauthorization should continue to support initiatives that advance innovation in public transportation. Incorporating new technologies and practices in public transit systems can provide consistent, reliable, and accessible service to every transit rider while improving the overall experience.

Investments in commuter rail should also be prioritized under the next reauthorization bill. Commuter rail systems maintain jurisdiction over many aging bridges that are critical to the safe and reliable operation of service. Existing federal bridge programs are largely focused on highway infrastructure and do not adequately address the unique needs of commuter rail. Reauthorization should create funding opportunities that prioritize commuter rail infrastructure, with a specific focus on rehabilitating and replacing aging rail bridges.

Reauthorization should also strengthen the national passenger rail network through dedicated funding and increased investments in existing state-supported routes.

Federal funding should continue to support accessibility improvements to transit systems via programs like the All Stations Accessibility Program and the Rail Vehicle Replacement Program, as well as support safety and security improvements on transit systems. Reauthorization should also provide reliable formula funding for both ADA paratransit services and locally coordinated programs to allow for long-term planning, implementation, and coordination at the regional level. Paratransit specifically could benefit from flexibility in using funding for capital and operations, given it is an unfunded federal mandate.

## **Maintained bridges**

State and local agencies maintain a vast network of bridge facilities, which provide vital connections for the passenger and freight movements that underpin the national economy. Additionally, bridges play a crucial role in the movement of agricultural goods by connecting rural production areas to regional and national markets. It is critical that the next reauthorization bill provide adequate funding for the state of good repair of this system, given that bridges are a major driver of transportation agencies' costs. The current discretionary Bridge Investment Program should be renewed and expanded to provide targeted funding, along with a formula component. The next reauthorization bill should allow local public agencies to receive federal bridge funding directly, empowering them to advance critical bridge infrastructure projects.

## **Performance-based programming**

Reauthorization should strengthen the federal performance management system by using data and objective analysis to achieve national performance goals. Discretionary programs should implement performance-based approaches when evaluating proposals, ensuring that key programs such as BUILD and INFRA best serve national interests.

MPOs have proven track records of prioritizing competing needs through a performance-driven, consensus-based process. They have the expertise to collect, analyze, and present complex datasets to understand performance needs across all modes of transportation. They also have relationships with transportation agencies, local elected officials, the private sector, and other key stakeholders that ensure all perspectives are incorporated into the planning and programming process. The reauthorization bill should leverage this local knowledge by retaining and expanding upon the existing suballocation of several federal funding sources.

## **Multimodal freight**

Reauthorization should continue to provide dedicated funding for freight projects through both formula and discretionary programs, while eliminating caps on multimodal projects and increasing mode flexibility for states. Both discretionary and formula freight programs should be retained with added eligibility and incentives for multijurisdictional collaboration on discretionary grants.

Reauthorization should continue and expand the existing dedicated funding programs for grade separations at highway-rail crossings, prioritizing locations with safety concerns and excessive delays for motorists and other highway system

users. Large-scale competitive programs like MEGA, INFRA, and BUILD should be preserved to fund regionally and nationally significant projects like the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency (CREATE) Program, particularly in cases where formula funding alone is insufficient to meet the scale and complexity of the need. Reauthorization should also support ongoing initiatives that address the national network's greatest chokepoints, such as the CREATE Program.

The federal government should also develop a comprehensive freight system needs assessment, which would identify strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of freight on local communities. The reauthorization bill should support a national multimodal freight research program, which could study urban freight solutions and potential revenue options based on freight activity.

## Technological innovation

The transportation industry is on the cusp of tremendous technological change — if properly harnessed, innovation can provide benefits to safety, operations, and asset condition. Further, existing technologies can be more broadly deployed across the transportation system and integrated into agencies' daily operations and long-term capital planning efforts. Reauthorization should encourage states, MPOs, and local agencies to optimize the use of transportation systems through creative, data-driven analyses. Cost-effective solutions can leverage technology, operations, alternative modes, and supportive land use policies to reduce congestion and achieve reliable travel times in key corridors.

Specifically, reauthorization can bolster Transportation Systems Management and Operations strategies, which incorporate Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) assets into an agency's operations and long-term planning. Pilot programs that incentivize states and MPOs should be retained to leverage technological solutions to manage congestion, increase safety, and improve air quality. Reauthorization can also support ITS deployment more broadly by making those investments eligible expenses across more federal programs.

For emerging technologies, federal policy should empower state and local governments to enact connected and automated vehicle policies consistent with local land use and mobility goals. It is important to develop tailored approaches that respond to local conditions without federal preemption. State and local authority over automated vehicles should be no less than their existing authority over human-driven vehicles.

## Resilient transportation systems

The next reauthorization bill should retain programs that allow states, MPOs, and local agencies to respond to and/or anticipate natural disasters and extreme weather events. This would include planning efforts that identify and prioritize vulnerable assets, their criticality, and capital improvements necessary to strengthen those assets against extreme weather events. These efforts can also support emergency preparedness, such as evacuation planning and coordination across first responder agencies. The reauthorization bill can link those planning efforts to implementation by providing funding for planned improvements, retaining eligibility of these expenditure types across programs, and incentivizing funds to address locations of greatest need.

