

Using the federal transportation bill to strengthen rural economies

Thriving rural communities often have one common characteristic: a *variety of ways for their residents and visitors to travel in and around the region.*

Many small cities and towns serve as the economic hub of a county or larger rural region, supporting businesses, tourist areas, recreation sites, universities and other job centers. The best of these thriving regions offer safe roads and transportation options—from vanpools to walkable main streets—especially for those who are unable to drive or want to leave the car at home. In fact, a variety of transportation options are more likely to attract skilled workers that make businesses competitive and successful in urban and rural areas alike.

To create and enhance great places to live, it is important to know how our new federal transportation bill, **Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21)**, has changed the way rural communities will access transportation dollars, what these funds may be used for and who will make funding decisions.



Securing important transportation dollars, step one: Communicate.

<p>Communicate with your state department of transportation (DOT)</p>	<p>Make your transportation priorities known to your state DOT officials. Dollars are available in the programs described below – but it will require elected officials and others to be proactive in seeking funds to make travel safer and expand transportation options.</p>
<p>Communicate with your state officials</p>	<p>Let your governor, state legislators and local transportation officials know about your priorities early and often as they decide how to distribute state transportation funding.</p>
<p>Communicate with your members of Congress</p>	<p>There is not enough overall funding to meet all the transportation needs in small cities and rural regions. Let your members of Congress know that funding for transportation options is important for your community to thrive.</p>

How do we fund walking and bicycling projects in rural areas?

Funding for bicycling and walking projects previously came mostly from three programs: **Transportation Enhancements, Safe Routes to Schools** and **Recreational Trails**. MAP-21 combines these three programs into one: the **Transportation Alternatives** Program (TA).

In your state, metropolitan and rural areas will compete for grants representing about half of the total TA program to build bicycling and walking projects. But state DOTs have the freedom to transfer the remaining **fifty percent** to almost any other project.



To successfully access and compete for federal TA funding, it is imperative to:

ONE	Urge your DOT officials to spend all TA funds on bicycling and walking projects — don't transfer 50 percent of the funds out of the program.
TWO	Understand how your region may apply for TA funds through the state's competitive grant process and what will make your application competitive. Contact Transportation for America at info@t4america.org for guidance on establishing a competitive grant process that promotes transportation options and stronger economies.
THREE	Look beyond TA to fund your bicycle and pedestrian project. Work with DOT officials to obtain additional funding from: the Surface Transportation Program (STP), the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) Program for qualifying areas with significant air pollution and the National Highway Performance Program (NHPP) for projects adjacent to a National Highway System roadway.

How to access federal funding for rural transit projects

There are several programs that provide funding for rural public transportation, including intercity bus service, vanpooling and more:

Formula Grants for Rural Areas (5311) — These grants fund capital, operating and planning expenses for public transportation projects in rural communities. This program contains tribal transit dollars and now includes funding to help low-income workers get to their jobs and other essential destinations.

Formula Grants for Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Persons with Disabilities (5310) — These funds are primarily used to purchase vehicles to transport older Americans and people with disabilities.

The Surface Transportation Program (STP) — Departing from the previous law, MAP-21 now directs states to repair most rural bridges through this flexible program, shrinking the funding available for the range of multi-modal transportation projects still eligible for these funds. Urge your state to repair bridges with other programs (such as the National Highway Performance Program) and reserve STP funding for other state and local priorities.

Communities with ambitious visions require significant infusions of funding. Although earmarks and discretionary grants from Congress and the Administration are now largely unavailable, there are other ways to help realize these visions. The following programs have various eligibility criteria and will not be suitable for every project, but they may be an important piece of the puzzle:

New Starts and Small Starts – This program may provide funding for low cost transit investment projects such as bus rapid transit, trolleys, streetcars and more.

Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (TIFIA) — Ten percent of the \$1.75 billion TIFIA loan program is set aside for rural regions. TIFIA could provide vital dollars in rural regions for projects such as a multi-modal center, a bus depot or a freight project, as long as the total project costs at least \$25 million and has secured a dedicated source of revenue to repay the loan.

Transportation Investments Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) — TIGER is a competitive grant program that funds innovative, multi-modal transportation projects with significant economic and environmental benefits. Although MAP-21 did not authorize the program, funds have been regularly appropriated by Congress since its creation in 2009. A share of TIGER funds are set aside for projects in rural areas and the U.S. Department of Transportation has supported rural communities to help them successfully compete for these dollars.