

# Montana

## *policy* REVIEW

Community Resiliency and  
the Built Environment:  
*Innovations and Policy  
Issues in Montana*



# Transportation Triage:

REBUILDING A 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY SYSTEM WHILE  
PREPARING FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup>

*by John Robert Smith and Gene Townsend*



## Building the System We Want

Montana's communities face diverse transportation challenges. Some areas are growing rapidly without the resources to properly plan for and serve new residents. Others are losing people and have high aging and low-income populations that need a variety of reliable transportation options. Many are simply reeling from decades of under investment in infrastructure and are in need of a lifeline.<sup>1</sup>

Every six years or so, Congress writes the rules for spending federal transportation dollars. In the current drafting of the bill, [Transportation for America](#) is calling on Congress to reorient our policy toward repairing and maintaining our 20th century transportation systems while building for the 21st century. The current federal transportation program provides scant assurance that our hard-earned tax dollars will be spent wisely and effectively and fails to adequately invest in a variety of travel options. We need federal transportation legislation that addresses and meets the needs of Montanans and all Americans.

Americans everywhere are eager for an update to our transportation programs that will expand our options. A 2010 poll conducted by a bipartisan team of pollsters found that 79 percent of rural Americans believe the United States would benefit from an expanded and improved transportation system, such as rail and buses.<sup>2</sup> A majority of voters would like to see existing roads and bridge infrastructure maintained and rehabilitated before adding new capacity. Rural transportation

stakeholders deserve improved rural accessibility, safety and a well-functioning transportation system that promotes health and economic vitality of communities.

## Maintaining What We Have — Saving Money and Improving Safety

Over the last 50 years, America has built a national highway system that connects regions and states across the country, but now much of that system is showing its age. A recent report on road conditions by Taxpayers for Common Sense and Smart Growth America found that over 7,300 miles, or 25 percent of Montana's state roads have fallen out of good condition and 7.5 percent of Montana's bridges are structurally deficient.<sup>3</sup> This state of affairs affects the longevity of our transportation system, costs money, and reduces the safety of our existing infrastructure.

According to the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, every dollar spent on repair of a highway can save up to \$14 down the road. Poor road conditions cost U.S. motorists \$67 billion a year in repairs and operating costs—an average of \$335 per motorist.<sup>4</sup> The Repair Priorities report concluded that investing too little on road repair significantly increases the state's future financial liabilities and recommends prioritizing maintenance and rehabilitation to reduce these future liabilities, benefit taxpayers and create a better transportation system.

Negative safety impacts of poor road conditions are particularly disproportionate for rural communities. Residents of small towns are more likely to be hurt or killed on the transportation system than those in urban areas. Nearly 60 percent of traffic fatalities occur on rural roads, while they carry 40 percent of the traffic and only 20 percent of the population.<sup>5</sup>

Ensuring we take care of the infrastructure in which we have already invested will result in more money down the road for Montana's transportation infrastructure, cost-savings for Montanan motorists, and help improve the safety of Montana's roads.

Streamline is Bozeman's area bus free bus service.



1 Transportation for America, <http://t4america.org/resources/2010survey/>

2 Transportation for America, <http://t4america.org/resources/2010survey/>

3 Smart Growth America, <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/2011/06/01/repair-priorities-transportation-spending-strategies-to-save-taxpayer-dollars-and-improve-roads/>

4 Report Card for America's Infrastructure, <http://www.infrastructurereportcard.org/fact-sheet/roads>

5 FHWA Safety Program, [http://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/local\\_rural\\_training/fhwasa10012/](http://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/local_rural_training/fhwasa10012/)



### We Ride the Line: Episode 1 - Connections.mp4

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A five-part web series explores the success of coordinated public transportation in the remote north central Montana region.

## The Needs of Older Montanans – and All Americans

Improving public transportation and expanding options helps older Montanans, particularly those in rural and frontier communities. In 2000, 23 percent of older adults in America lived in rural areas. As they age, they risk being isolated in their homes in the absence of adequate transportation infrastructure. They would have no way to get to the services they frequent, such as healthcare and grocery stores.

Transportation for America's recent report, *Aging in Place, Stuck without Options*, addresses these challenges in detail.<sup>6</sup> The report ranked metro areas according to the percentage of seniors projected to face poor transit access, and asked: How do we address the shrinking mobility options of baby boomers who wish to stay in their homes and “age in place?”

Montana will face especially steep challenges, with a projected 104.8 percent increase in its population of residents 65 and older between 2000 and 2030, compared to 99.8 percent nationwide. The projected increase rises to 220.5 percent in Flathead County, 224.9 percent in Ravalli County, 227.7 percent in Lewis and Clark County and 328 percent in Jefferson County.<sup>7</sup>

Accommodating seniors who want to age in place — and most of them do — will be a challenge for our nation's transportation system. But there is a lot that we can do. T4 America Director James Corless recently testified before the Senate Subcommittee on Housing, Transportation and Community Development about policies that could be included in the next transportation authorization to specifically address needs of individuals with disabilities and older Americans. We can increase funding for bus routes, vanpools and ridesharing. We can provide incentives for community non-profits to operate their own systems. We can encourage states to involve seniors more intimately in the planning process and ensure officials are still able to “flex” federal dollars for transit projects. We can also prioritize “complete streets” that meet the needs of all users, including older Americans on foot, in wheelchairs or on their way to a transit stop.

## The Link Between Transportation and Health

The impact of transportation investments and decisions on Montanans' health cannot be overstated.

Montanans benefited from the massive infrastructure investment brought on by the Interstate Highway Act in the 1950s. Unfortunately, by building neighborhoods and towns that require an automobile trip for nearly everything, we have literally engineered physical activity out of our daily lives.

As our travel habits have changed, obesity and diabetes have been on the rise. In 1995, Americans took 42 percent fewer trips on foot than in 1975, and the number has continued to drop.<sup>8</sup> Only one in ten American children now walks or bikes to school. At the same time, the percentage of individuals who are obese has doubled in the last two decades, along with rates of diabetes. The percentage of overweight children nearly tripled, and more children today are being diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes, a disease that used to be limited to adults.

According to a report from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Trust for America's Health, Montana has an adult obesity rate of about 23 percent.<sup>9</sup> The report also notes that the State of Montana has failed to enact complete streets legislation, which would ensure that all users — pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, wheelchair users and transit riders — have safe access on Montana's streets. Some progress toward “complete streets” has occurred in Bozeman, Helena and Missoula, but local, state and federal policy change is an important next step.

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6 Transportation for America, <http://t4america.org/resources/seniorsmobilitycrisis2011/>

7 Montana Population Projection, [http://ceic.mt.gov/Demog/project/PopProjPercentChg2030\\_65+\(07\).pdf](http://ceic.mt.gov/Demog/project/PopProjPercentChg2030_65+(07).pdf)

8 Surface Transportation Policy Partnership. <http://www.transact.org/report.asp?id=159>

9 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. <http://www.rwjf.org/childhoodobesity/product.jsp?id=45348>

### Rural Transportation Access, Options, and Economic Vitality

The connection between economic vitality and transportation access and services in small towns and rural communities was the subject of a recent report from the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI).<sup>10</sup> The report found that increased accessibility and mobility options improve quality of life, which in turn attracts both individuals and new businesses to rural areas, increasing economic development.

RUPRI found that a variety of transportation investments — including transit, vanpools, walking and biking paths, intercity bus, and roads and highways — are critical to the economic development and overall health of smaller communities and rural areas. The most beneficial investments are those that improve access to job centers and essential services, reduce cost of living, and fuel local private-sector growth by fostering communities where people want to live and work. To facilitate this, RUPRI's recommendations include: encouraging innovation and multimodal investments such as rail; coordination, cost-effectiveness and efficiency (in local street connectivity, access management, and intercity bus, for instance); and flexibility for rural areas to focus resources on investments that meet specific needs and characteristics of the community.

Transportation investments that are not driven by locally identified priorities or collaborative approaches will lessen the potential to achieve key outcomes. Misdirected investments are more likely to diminish rural economic development potential and may lead to unintended negative consequences such as a reduced ability to pay for existing transportation improvements and services. Thus, some core policy recommendations included local rural stakeholder engagement in transportation planning and decision-making, integrated coordinated regional planning and implementation, encouraging innovation and integration for cost effective outcomes.

### Addressing Rural Transportation Challenges: Policy Proposal

Over the past two years, Transportation for America worked with an array of organizations around the country, including the Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living (APRIL), the National Center for Frontier Communities and the National Rural Assembly, as well as a number of Montana based groups to develop a proposal to enhance rural transportation systems. We traveled to Montana to talk to people personally about their transportation needs and have specifically worked to address the transportation access, mobility, health, quality of life, and economic vitality issues that are primary concerns of rural transportation stakeholders.

The recommendations include:

- Incorporating local stakeholders in the planning process;
- Improving efficiency and effectiveness of rural transit services through development of a coordinated rural transit plan;
- Designation of a “mobility manager”—an individual who would provide capacity to adequately develop and enhance implementation of these plans;
- Increasing flexibility for specialized transit operators to serve all individuals dependent on transit, including seniors and people with disabilities;
- Implementing a Rural Transit Cost Savings program to mitigate the disproportionate impact volatile gas prices have on rural transit providers through grants to increase fuel and energy efficiency of rural transit fleets and operators;
- Providing increased flexibility to invest in additional transportation improvements — rail, local street networks, intercity bus, access management — to meet the unique needs of rural communities. The funding silos in Washington often “predetermine” the best solutions for rural communities. Increased flexibility will allow for outcome based investment decisions directed from the ground up;
- Improving rural safety by prioritizing the most high risk roads, aiding rural areas in meeting new federal signage requirements and maximizing funding benefits by prioritizing low-cost, high-yield safety improvements;
- Spurring innovation and revitalization of Main Street through a competitive grant program to allow small cities and towns — in non-metropolitan areas and on tribal reservations — to revitalize their existing town centers, promote economic development, leverage private dollars with public investments and provide a variety of transportation options, including car sharing, accessible walking and biking paths, intercity buses and public transportation;
- Additionally leveraging private investment in public transportation through incentives to encourage private intercity bus and commuter vanpool providers to enhance service in rural areas; and
- Helping tribes meet increased transit demand and increasing funding for the Indian Reservation Road program

### Montanans Have Key Champions in Washington

Montana's transportation challenges have far-reaching impacts on the health, quality of life, and economic vitality of Montana's communities. Luckily, Montanans have a powerful champion in Senator Max Baucus, who in addition to being one of the “big four” on the Environment and Public Works Committee is also the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, which will lead the way in determining the size and revenue source of an eventual bill. With numerous details still in the works, Montanans who want increased options and real accountability in the bill should make their preferences known to Senator Baucus and his staff.

<sup>10</sup> Rural Policy Research Institute. <http://www.rupri.org/>

Montana's junior Senator, Jon Tester – holds a position on the Senate Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee that oversees the transit element of the bill. The Committee's Chairman, Senator Tim Johnson of South Dakota, has also taken a particular concern in the diverse transportation needs of rural Americans and tribes. In this environment, Senator Tester's position provides him unique capacity to be an advocate for rural transit and transportation in Montana. For example, in a May 19, 2011 committee hearing around priorities and challenges of the surface transportation authorization, he spoke up on the need for rural transit services and flexibility to help ensure all Montanans have access to education, jobs and health services.

## Conclusion

This is indeed a crucial time for the nation's transportation policy, as key players from the Obama administration down to the relevant Congressional committees are preparing to move forward with a reauthorization of current surface transportation law. Many advocates were disappointed by House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman John Mica's proposal to cut the transportation budget by 35 percent, eliminate dedicated funding for biking and walking and potentially reduce the number of roads and highways eligible for federal support.

The prospects for real investment and new options are more promising in the Senate. The Environment and Public Works committee is planning on moving forward with their transportation authorization proposal addressing the highway portion of surface transportation, and the Senate Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee, where Senator Tester sits, is currently crafting the public transportation policy.

How we get to work, the quality and safety of where we call home and the opportunity to live actively are all dependent on the investments and policy directives of the next transportation bill. Montanans can surely reap the benefits of this legislation for years to come, but only if we communicate our priorities to our leaders in Washington so we can build a transportation system that will meet our needs well into the 21st Century.

***Transportation for America (T4 America)** is the largest, most diverse coalition working on transportation reform today. Our nation's transportation network is based on a policy that has not been significantly updated since the 1950's. We believe it is time for a bold new vision — transportation that guarantees our freedom to move however we choose and leads to a stronger economy, greater energy security, cleaner environment and healthier America for all of us. We're calling for more responsible investment of our federal tax dollars to create a safer, cleaner, smarter transportation system that works for everyone.*

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One of North Central Montana Transit's (NCMT) buses in service.

