

2010 TRANSPORTATION POLICY: A ROAD MAP FOR CONNECTICUT'S NEXT GOVERNOR

It's said that "failing to plan is planning to fail." Connecticut is reeling from the impacts of an ad hoc, unplanned approach to transportation policy that, by default, has made roads and suburban sprawl a priority over creating thriving communities. As a result, Connecticut faces congestion that threatens its economic competitiveness, road and bridge conditions among the worst in the country, limited walking and bicycling infrastructure, and mass transit systems that can't keep pace with demand.

VISION: A SUSTAINABLE, MULTI-MODAL TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Connecticut's leading transportation experts and advocates agree: Connecticut needs to develop and implement a long-term transportation policy that supports community building, prioritizes mass transit, emphasizes downtowns and main streets through investment in cycling and walking initiatives, reduces our emphasis on road building and road widening that produces only strip malls, big box stores and sprawl. Implementing this vision will foster communities that attract young workers and efficiently serve an aging population. Shifting our policy focus in this way will enhance Connecticut's economic competitiveness, protect our environment and improve the quality of life that Connecticut prides itself upon.

We're closer than ever to permanently achieving this vision. Over the past few years we have seen greater investment in transit from the state, and a Department of Transportation that is recognizing the importance of transit to the success of Connecticut in the 21st century. We still need action, however.

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GETTING THERE: LEADERSHIP NEEDED!

To institutionalize this vision, however, Connecticut needs a committed Governor whose transportation strategy and policies permanently shift us toward a sustainable future. This can be done through several new measures, but should also build on past efforts. First steps toward this new vision should be made by achieving the goals of the Responsible Growth Task Force and the Smart Growth Working Group, and by implementing the recommendations in the State's Conservation and Development Policies Plan.

But that won't be enough. We must reprioritize our transportation investments to be less automobile-centric, proactively connect our land use and transportation policies so they are complementary, and adopt proven best practices. Here are some ways to achieve this 21st century transportation and community building vision.

SUPPORT STATE AND REGIONAL PLANNING

CONNDOT MUST PROACTIVELY COORDINATE TRANSPORTATION AND LAND USE POLICY

Connecticut's new Governor must hold the Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDOT) accountable for working closely with municipalities to solve congestion and land use challenges in ways that are sustainable.

To do this, ConnDOT must become a leader in state-driven smart growth. ConnDOT must support transit oriented development and use the new process for Plans of Conservation and Development to coordinate strategic land use and transportation plans with municipalities and regional government agencies.

CREATE A TRANSIT VILLAGE PROGRAM

To ensure that these transit-oriented plans are implemented successfully, ConnDOT should create a Transit Village program, which would target funding to towns and villages that demonstrate intent to grow more sustainably around transit like light, commuter and high speed rail, as well as bus and bus rapid transit systems, and to pursue a Smart Growth future.

New Jersey began a similar program that created incentives for municipalities to develop around transit or downtown areas. The program lays out criteria which municipalities must meet to be eligible for funding¹.

ConnDOT is well-suited to lead this initiative because it employs the largest concentration of planners in the State and has the ability to partner with local communities to develop plans that encourage development in downtowns and increases transportation options for communities.

RELEASE FUNDING FOR TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT

Connecticut currently has \$10 million on the Bonding Commission list for transit-oriented development grants. A good first step towards creating a Transit Village program would be to release this funding.

An additional program from New Jersey that can help ConnDOT and municipalities partner together to link transit and land use is the Urban Transit Hub Tax Credit. This credit, enacted in 2008, provides tax credits for businesses that build or lease offices and create jobs near urban train and light rail stations in big cities. To be eligible, businesses must employ at least 250 people and invest at least \$50 million in a facility within a half mile of stations. A similar program in Connecticut can help revitalize places like Bridgeport, Hartford and Waterbury and should be expanded to include urban bus and bus rapid transit stations.

FIX IT FIRST

To support better connections between land use and transportation, Connecticut must spend its limited resources more wisely. Our roads and bridges rank poorly compared to US averages. While Connecticut has begun to shift towards prioritizing its existing road and bridge infrastructure over the past two years, we still face a ‘state of good repair’ deficit of approximately \$800 million over five years. We need to fix what we have before we build wider roads and bridges.

Yet the state is hindered because of past decisions that emphasized building bigger roadways and bridges that eat up precious and limited maintenance and repair resources. For example, the Q-Bridge expansion from six to ten lanes represents *nearly 45%* of Connecticut’s total highway and bridge spending.² Putting highway and bridge expansion at the top of our transportation to-do list is clearly financially unsustainable and must stop now if Connecticut is to maintain its existing infrastructure.

While completing the Q-Bridge is a foregone conclusion, future road expansions and widenings don’t have to be. Moving forward, Connecticut should cap its spending on road expansion projects at 5% and reallocate the newly available funding towards fixing our existing road and bridge infrastructure and enhancing our residents’ transportation options. Prioritizing funding to existing

Recommendations

- ConnDOT must partner more effectively with municipalities to promote smart growth and transit-oriented development.
- Expect ConnDOT to proactively link transportation to sustainable land use policies.
- Establish a Transit Village Program.
- Release \$10 million in transit-oriented development grants from the State Bonding Commission.
- Adopt an Urban Transit Hub Tax Credit to create incentives for transit-oriented development in Connecticut’s bigger cities.

road and bridge infrastructure is the critical first step towards realizing a sustainable transportation system.

New Jersey is a powerful case study in success for this “fix-it-first” policy. In the mid-90s, the New Jersey Department of Transportation was spending nearly 50% of its road budget on major expansion projects. Today, NJDOT spends only 5%. In order to truly shift Connecticut to a more sustainable future, this is a key first step.

Fix-it-first also means finding innovative solutions to replacing our deteriorating infrastructure. For example, many components of Connecticut’s highway system, like I-84 in Hartford or Route 34 in New Haven, are facing the end of their useful lifespans. ConnDOT must seize the opportunity to pursue strategies, such as urban highway removal, that enhance the communities that this infrastructure destroyed in the past. Such plans have been successful in reconnecting communities and spurring economic growth in Milwaukee, San Francisco and along the West Side of Manhattan.

CREATE EFFICIENT, INTERCONNECTED, MULTI-MODAL TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS

De-emphasizing road and bridge expansion and focusing on ‘fix it first’ policies save money. Those savings should be invested in developing the efficient multi-modal transportation system that will attract and retain businesses, keep our young people in Connecticut, and support a broad range of workers.

A multi-modal system, which is simply a system that links varying transportation modes and provides transportation choice for Connecticut’s residents, will enhance existing transit systems, expand transit service to underserved communities and invest more funding in non-motorized transportation options like walking and biking. This multi-modal transportation network can support the state’s climate change, responsible growth and business development goals as well as enhance the livability and quality life of Connecticut’s cities and towns. These multi-modal investments are essential if we want to attract new business, create good jobs, stem the “brain

Recommendations

- Prioritize road and bridge transportation funding to ‘Fix-it-First’ measures and pursue innovative strategies to repair and replace deteriorating infrastructure that enhances communities and supports smart growth initiatives.
- Make the Q-Bridge project the last major road and bridge expansion project in the state.
- Cap spending on expansion projects at 5% of the total transportation budget.
- Pursue urban highway removal as a way to reduce maintenance costs for aging infrastructure and as a way to enhance Connecticut’s cities and communities.

drain” of 18-35 years olds from Connecticut to transit-oriented places like New York and Boston and efficiently move people and goods in a way that protects our environment.

The next governor must make key investments in bus, bus rapid transit, commuter rail, high speed rail, streetcar, pedestrian, and cycling options a priority if they are to be available, affordable, and efficient to give people viable alternatives to driving. To start, the state must fully implement its high priority transit projects like the New Haven-Hartford-Springfield line and the New Britain-Hartford Bus Rapid Transit project. In addition, the state can easily begin expand transit along a handful of the most heavily traveled routes and could provide transit options for as many as 64,000 residents who currently lack transit, and would cost about \$4.5 million per year³.

Connecticut has made strides over the past few years to enhance cycling and walking as viable transportation options. The state must continue this progress by dedicating greater funding to these modes of transportation, fully implement its recently adopted ‘Complete Streets’ law and pursue other legislation, such as the recently proposed ‘Vulnerable User’ bill, that will protect cyclists and pedestrians and other vulnerable users of Connecticut’s roads and public ways.

Recommendations:

- Expand transportation choice by prioritizing transit modes and non-motorized transportation options like cycling and walking.
- Expand funding for existing rail and bus transit systems to address underserved communities.
- Implement Connecticut’s high priority transit projects like the New Haven to Springfield Commuter Rail project and the New Britain to Hartford Bus Rapid Transit project.
- Increase funding for cycling and walking initiatives like a Safe Routes to Transit and Safe Routes for Seniors programs.
- Fully implement existing legislation that enhances cycling and walking as transportation options and support future legislation that will protect all users of Connecticut’s roadways.

ADOPT STRATEGIC FINANCING INITIATIVES

The need to fund this relatively small investment to expand bus service highlights the broader transportation financing challenge facing Connecticut right now. With the advent of more fuel efficient vehicles, the State’s most significant funding mechanism—the gas tax—is proving to be an insufficient tool to finance our transportation network.

To invest in a smart transportation program, funding must be spent more wisely, efficiencies in project implementation must be found⁴, existing revenue must be dedicated towards its original intent—transportation—and new revenue options for transportation need to be considered as well.

These tough decisions are imminent and cannot be put off. Transportation finance is an important issue that needs to be at the forefront of any new transportation policy. With a Statewide Transportation Fund that will run a deficit of nearly \$50 million in 2011 and the unfunded needs of transit and ‘state of good repair’ in Connecticut’s 2010-2014 Capital Program close to \$2 billion, the need to sustainably finance Connecticut’s transportation system is a most pressing issue.

To add to Connecticut’s financing woes, it is becoming increasingly clear that the state needs to become more self-sufficient in its transportation financing. As it stands now, Connecticut relies too heavily on federal funding for projects, reducing the number and quality of projects the state can complete and making the state less competitive for future federal funding.

To address these shortfalls, several options must be considered.

STOP DIVERTING THE GROSS RECEIPTS TAX

Connecticut must stop diverting revenue from the Gross Receipts Tax (GRT) from its original destination, the Special Transportation Fund (STF). According to a July 2009 report by the Office of Fiscal Analysis, 60% of the \$1.5 billion in collections from the GRT since 2005 have been diverted from the STF and spent elsewhere.⁵ This diversion amounts to \$900 million over roughly five years—\$225 million a year—in funding that could have been used in Connecticut’s transportation system. Stopping this diversion is a good first step to ensuring Connecticut can support the multi-modal vision put forth above.

INCREASE THE GAS TAX

However, closing the GRT will only go so far. New revenues for the Special Transportation Fund are desperately needed.

In the short term, the most viable available option to fully fund the Special Transportation Fund is a gas tax increase. The MetroHartford Alliance, the Hartford region’s Chamber of Commerce, suggests a three-cent increase per year for five years, which would generate \$225 million a year upon full implementation.⁶ This gas tax increase would, in actuality, simply reinstate the same gas tax level as in 1998.

IMPLEMENT TOLLS

Another revenue generating tool is tolling or congestion pricing. For years the state has debated reinstating tolls on Connecticut’s roadways, but no definitive action has ever been taken. As a result, Connecticut is one of two states in the Northeast without tolls, a fact that severely limits the capacity of Connecticut to fully fund its transportation system.

Recommendations

- Aggressively address Connecticut’s transportation financing needs.
- Prioritize existing funding to transportation options that are more sustainable.
- End the loophole in the Gross Receipts Tax.
- Increase the gas tax by fifteen cents over five years.
- Implement some form of tolling or congestion pricing on Connecticut’s roadways.

Tolling cannot be done arbitrarily, however. A good basis for considering toll implementation can be the Cambridge Systematics study of 2009.⁷ This study, while far from perfect, proffered a variety of tolling options available to the state, including tolling limited access highways and congestion pricing in the I-95 corridor.

These two options alone would generate significant revenue, ranging from \$9-\$22 billion (depending upon the toll rates) over a 30 year period for tolling all limited access highways to \$32 billion for congestion pricing in the I-95 and Merritt Parkway corridor over the same time period.

INCREASE EXECUTIVE AGENCY ACCOUNTABILITY

Finally, sustainable transportation reform policies will be ineffective unless agencies like ConnDOT, the Department of Economic and Community Development and the Department of Environmental Protection work together in a mutually beneficial manner. While some progress has been made in recent years towards this end, much more needs to be done.

Above all, Connecticut's next Governor must ensure that executive branch agencies, particularly those whose work relates to "responsible growth" as defined by the responsible growth task force, are coordinated and marching in lockstep toward measurable goals. Establishing a few, easily understood and measurable responsible growth funding targets and policy objectives is critical, coupled with holding these executive agencies responsible for meeting these interlocking goals.

Sources and Resources:

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Smart Growth America:

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Transportation for America's Blueprint – The Route to Reform:

<http://t4america.org/blueprint>

¹ [NJ Transit Village Initiative Overview](#)

² [Tracking the Dollars: A Review of Projected Transportation Spending in Connecticut, 2010-2013](#), Tri-State Transportation Campaign March 2010

³ [Missing Links: Prioritized Bus Service Expansion Plan](#), Transit for Connecticut and Regional Plan Association, January 2010

⁴ [“Legislative Panel to Study DOT’s Handling of Highway Projects”](#), *CT Mirror*, June 18, 2010

⁵ [Connecticut Revenue and Budget Data](#), Office of Fiscal Analysis, July 2009

⁶ Transportation Funding—[An Imperative for Economic Stability and Strategic Growth](#), MetroHartford Alliance, 2007

⁷ [Electronic Tolls and Congestion Pricing Study](#), Cambridge Systematics, February, 2009

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



The Tri-State Transportation Campaign is a non-profit organization dedicated to creating a more balanced, environmentally friendly and equitable transportation system in the Connecticut, New York and New Jersey region. For more information visit www.tstc.org or call Ryan Lynch, Connecticut coordinator, at 860-796-6988.