



# Rebuilding America: The Impact of the Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act

Center Forward Basics

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## Overview

America's infrastructure is aging rapidly, with a large portion of the nation's roads in poor or mediocre condition, and thousands of bridges deemed structurally deficient. Surface transportation—our roads, highways, bridges, and public transit systems—forms the backbone of our nation's economy and daily life, yet it has suffered from decades of underinvestment and delayed maintenance. The federal government plays a vital role in sustaining and modernizing this network through periodic legislation authorizing funding and outlining national priorities. The Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act is a critical piece of this effort, providing updated funding and strategic direction for infrastructure development across the country. Passed as part of the broader Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, this legislation aims to enhance safety, improve environmental sustainability, and promote long-term economic growth.

As the U.S. confronts challenges ranging from climate change to economic inequality, the Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act represents a financial commitment as well as a forward-looking vision for mobility and infrastructure. In this Basic, we will review how the Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act came to be and its potential impact.

## History and Provisions

The Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act is a significant component of the United States' ongoing effort to modernize its infrastructure. Historically, federal surface transportation policy has been structured through multi-year reauthorization bills providing states and localities with predictable funding streams. Predecessors such as the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21) and the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act laid the groundwork for national transportation priorities and investment frameworks. Introduced in 2021, the Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act became a cornerstone of the broader Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which was signed into law in November of that year. This reauthorization extended and expanded the nation's core highway and transit programs in response to 21st-century needs, including climate change, safety concerns, and the push for greater equity in infrastructure planning.

The Act authorizes nearly \$300 billion over five years for federal highway, transit, and safety programs, marking one of the largest infrastructure investments in U.S. history. A key feature of the legislation is its blend of formula-based funding, which ensures stability for state departments of transportation, and discretionary grants, which allow for targeted federal investment in high-priority projects. Some of the bill's major provisions include a heightened emphasis on road safety through road safety initiatives and improvements in pedestrian and cyclist infrastructure. Additionally, the Act promotes environmental sustainability by funding projects to reduce carbon emissions and support climate resilience. It also incentivizes the deployment of electric vehicle (EV) infrastructure, innovative technology, and low-carbon transit solutions. With an integrated

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Center Forward brings together members of Congress, not-for-profits, academic experts, trade associations, corporations and unions to find common ground. Our mission: to give centrist allies the information they need to craft common sense solutions, and provide those allies the support they need to turn those ideas into results.

In order to meet our challenges we need to put aside the partisan bickering that has gridlocked Washington and come together to find common sense solutions.

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approach to modernization, safety, and environmental goals, the Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act aims to reshape the nation's infrastructure, taking into account both current needs and future demands.

While the Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act outlines an ambitious vision, its implementation presents several challenges. A significant portion of the funding is allocated through the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), with states and municipalities responsible for applying these funds. Approximately \$273 billion is allocated for highways, and \$69 billion for public transit. Additional funds are directed toward rail improvements, safety programs, and environmental initiatives. However, concerns persist about whether local governments possess the necessary administrative capacity and technical expertise to deploy these resources quickly and equitably. Furthermore, some critics argue that continued investment in highway expansion could undermine climate goals by encouraging more car travel and emissions, despite the Act's environmental provisions. Ensuring transparency, accountability, and long-term planning at every level of government will be essential to realizing the transformative potential of this legislation.

## Financial & Social Impacts

The Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act is poised to generate substantial economic benefits by stimulating job creation, enhancing productivity, and improving the movement of goods and people. Infrastructure projects funded by the Act—such as highway repairs, transit system upgrades, and bridge replacements—require a broad range of labor, from skilled construction workers and engineers to planners and environmental specialists. According to estimates from the White House and independent economists, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which includes the Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act, is expected to support millions of jobs over its lifespan. In addition to job creation, improved transportation networks can reduce travel time, lower vehicle maintenance costs, and enhance supply chain efficiency—factors contributing directly to regional economic growth and competitiveness.

Beyond the economic effects, the Act carries significant social implications, particularly in addressing historic inequities in infrastructure investment. Many low-income and minority communities have suffered from a lack of safe, reliable transportation or have been divided and displaced by highway development in the past decades. This legislation includes targeted funding and planning incentives to prioritize projects reconnecting communities, expand access to public transit, and reduce transportation-related barriers. Programs focused on rural development and urban mobility improvements aim to create more inclusive access to economic opportunities, education, and healthcare. By investing in modern and equitable infrastructure, the Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act seeks to promote a more just and connected society.

## Looking Ahead

While the Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act marks a step forward in federal infrastructure policy, its success will ultimately depend on how effectively its goals are implemented. Oversight and accountability remain critical concerns, especially with a large volume of funding to be distributed across varied jurisdictions and agencies. Ensuring projects align with national priorities—such as sustainability, equity, and resilience—will require strong coordination among federal, state, and local governments. An ongoing debate surrounds the allocation of funds between expanding highway systems and investing in more sustainable modes of transportation. Critics warn that continued road expansion could counteract the Act's environmental aims by increasing car dependency and emissions, underscoring the need for thoughtful project selection and climate-conscious planning.

Looking ahead, the Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act has the potential to reshape how the United States approaches infrastructure for generations to come. Laying the groundwork for cleaner transit, safer roads, and more equitable access sets a precedent for modern infrastructure policy. Future reauthorizations and legislation are likely to build upon this foundation, with an even greater emphasis on climate adaptation, advanced technologies, and multimodal systems. If implemented

effectively, this Act could mark the beginning of a new era—one where infrastructure not only supports economic growth but also reflects American values of sustainability, inclusivity, and resilience.

## Links to Other Resources

- Congress.Gov - [Text - S.1931 - 117th Congress \(2021-2022\): Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act of 2021](#)
- Surface Transportation Board - [STB Reauthorization Act Reports - Surface Transportation Board](#)
- Transportation for America - [Transportation For America Reauthorization 101](#)
- U.S. Department of Transportation - [Surface Transportation Reauthorization - Legislative Affairs and Policy Communications](#)
- U.S. Senate Committee - [Whitehouse Opening Statement at Hearing on Surface Transportation Reauthorization - Minority News](#)