

Rural and Regional Transportation Priorities

The **National Association of Development Organizations (NADO)** and its affiliate group **RPO America**, which is comprised of transit practitioners from predominantly rural and small metro regions across the nation, are uniquely positioned to assess how federal surface transportation programs are impacting rural and small metro communities, and to identify challenges and barriers that could prevent these regions from fully benefiting from federal transportation programs and funding. To ensure the success of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and other federal investments in transportation, policymakers should take action to implement the recommendations below.

KEY PRIORITIES

Further action is needed from policymakers to:

1. Continue to expand and enhance the role of **Regional Transportation Planning Organizations**, including Metropolitan Planning Organizations (**MPOs**) and Regional Transportation Planning Organizations (**RTPOs**).
2. Direct **more targeted resources** to smaller communities, including those below a **50,000 population threshold**.

Additional ways that policymakers can continue to improve the effectiveness of rural surface transportation investments and policies are identified below within four priority areas: regional planning; the federal aid process; rural safety; and rural transit.

REGIONAL PLANNING

Regional transportation planning organizations enhance the ability of rural, small metro, and resource-challenged communities to assess regional needs, to secure federal funding to address those needs, and to administer those resources effectively. To ensure that rural and small communities will fully benefit from the availability of federal funding sources, NADO and RPO America encourage policymakers to implement policies that will:

- **Increase funding allocated to MPOs and RTPOs**, including Metropolitan Planning (PL) funds, State Planning and Research (SPR) funds, and Surface Transportation Block Grant (STBG) funds. Additionally, establish a minimum Metropolitan Planning (PL) funding floor for all such organizations.
- Elevate state **consultation requirements** with MPOs and RTPOs to **“cooperation.”**

FEDERAL AID PROCESS

Resource-challenged rural and small metro communities often lack the resources and capacity to successfully compete for competitive grant programs. To ensure that rural communities are able to successfully access and administer federal funds, policymakers should:

- **Reduce and/or eliminate local match requirements** for rural communities (under 50,000 population) and small MPOs (50,000 to 200,000 population), recognizing that these communities are typically resource-challenged. Reductions in local match are particularly needed within the 5311 Rural Transit Program; the Safe Streets for All Program; the Rural Surface Transportation Grant Program; and the State Planning and Research Program.
- **Simplify and shorten discretionary grant applications.** The USDOT has made significant strides in streamlining the Safe Streets for All action plan application process, which could be utilized as a model for simplifying other programs' application processes to make them less burdensome.
- **Reduce the minimum award (floor) amounts** for federal funding programs that are intended to benefit small and rural communities.
- **Create and retain rural set-asides for discretionary programs.** In particular, retain the current 50% rural set-aside for the RAISE program, and continue to uphold the 100% federal share (no match) investment level.
- **Provide earlier notice of forthcoming Notice of Funding Opportunity** release dates so that communities can begin preparing to apply sooner, and extend the standard application period to **90 days** for rural applicants specifically.

RURAL SAFETY

The importance of transportation safety and the pursuit of zero roadway fatalities cannot be overstated. Although the volume of serious accidents and fatalities remains disproportionately high in rural America, the safety funding directed toward rural communities remains disproportionately low. Providing adequate resources to protect the traveling public's safety in all regions, both rural and urban, should be a top priority. To address this critical area of public safety, policymakers should:

- **Direct more targeted resources** toward the transportation safety needs of rural and small metro communities.
- **Reduce local match requirements** for rural and small metro communities within the **Safe Streets for All program** and other transportation safety programs.

RURAL TRANSIT

Transit systems are extremely costly for less populated rural communities to operate. Despite limited resources for transit in rural areas, the demand for services is continuing to escalate – particularly among the growing elderly population – and rural areas have the least capability to respond. Costs are a primary obstacle to establishing new rural transit services, and even existing rural transit providers often lack the capacity to maintain reliable service. To address these mobility and accessibility challenges facing rural residents, policymakers should:

- **Reduce the local match requirement** for 5311 (Rural Transit) to no more than 20%
- **Increase funding for transit programs** supporting rural transit services, including 5310 (Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities) and 5311 (Rural Transit) programs