



National Headquarters
2121 Ward Court, NW, 5th Floor Washington, DC 20037

Community Decision-Making Pilot Program

The opportunities that communities have to influence transportation decision-making varies greatly.

Historically, the communities most likely to be detrimentally impacted by transportation projects—especially Black and Brown communities—have had little say in whether those projects are built. As a result, highways and roads have often been built in ways that reinforce segregation and severely diminish the quality of life in these communities.

In 1991, Congress passed the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), which assigned greater responsibility for transportation planning to local jurisdictions. Included in ISTEA were specific requirements for public engagement, which have been enhanced in subsequent federal surface transportation reauthorizations. Currently, metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), regional transportation planning organizations (RTPOs) and state Departments of Transportation (DOTs) are required to provide interested parties an opportunity to comment on transportation projects and are obligated to respond to comments submitted. This obligation applies both to the five-year plans under the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) and the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP), as well as long-range plans. Unfortunately, the extent to which transportation planners deliberately engage the community and incorporate these comments into their plans varies greatly from one community to the next.

A pilot project could build a greater voice for impacted residents in selected communities.

This pilot project proposes, in selected communities, to provide a greater opportunity for engagement in the transportation planning process to members of the community. The program would provide 10 grants of \$400,000 each to local government (city or county) transportation departments, MPOs or RTPOs who partner with local non-profit 501(c)(3) community organizations to ensure a greater stake for impacted residents in both long-range and five-year plans. Funds would go both to the planning agencies to encourage them to enhance their outreach and engagement with local communities and to local non-profit organizations to build their capacity for participation in the planning process. At least 40% of the funding would be required to go to the community-based non-profit. Community organizations would be empowered to participate directly in setting priorities and selecting projects. The program would set an additional \$200,000 aside for U.S. DOT to assist community-based organizations with obtaining and managing the grants.

Participants in the pilot program would be required to ensure community input is directly incorporated throughout the planning process.

U.S. DOT would select participants in the pilot program based on their willingness to commit to selecting both priorities and projects based on public input, and measuring the degree of community engagement based on number and diversity of participants. Additionally, applicants would be required to include strategies for obtaining input from those communities who historically have been most directly and negatively impacted by transportation decision-making, including those with disabilities, and who have historically faced a lack of investment. The community partner would be empowered not only to shape the planning process, but also to report out on the level that community members felt included in the process, and the planning agency as well as local partners would have the opportunity to highlight lessons learned and best practices after the grant period is over.

This program is a pillar in Rails-to-Trails Conservancy's vision of a transformative reauthorization bill, built from a federal agenda outlines the policy changes necessary to deliver a transportation system that is fundamental to equitable, healthy communities. Learn more at railstotrails.org/trailstransform#bills.