Since 1992, Transportation Alternatives (TA), formerly known as Transportation Enhancements (TE), has provided more than $16.4 billion in project awards to support the development and implementation of thousands of trail and active transportation projects in hundreds of communities. Despite the positive impact of TA and a 70% funding increase in recent legislation, the amount of funds available is not nearly enough to satisfy the demand across the United States, and many TA projects go unfunded each year.

The following analysis—implemented through Rails-to-Trails Conservancy’s (RTC’s) Transportation Alternatives Data Exchange (TrADE), with data from the Federal Management Information System (FMIS) and RTC’s direct data collection from state departments of transportation (DOTs)—provides a snapshot of this demand.

**New Funding Provides an Opportunity to Meet Unprecedented Demand**

Throughout the initial five-year duration of the Fixing America’s Surface Transportation (FAST) Act from fiscal years 2016 to 2020, demand for TA funds has grown 124%. However, the amount of funds awarded and available during this same period remains well below the demand. Only 24% of the $15.5 billion requested by communities was funded over the initial five years of the FAST Act, which left nearly $11.7 billion (76%) in TA-eligible project requests unfunded during the bill.

As the United States sees unprecedented demand for trails, walking and biking, the passage of the new Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) could help reduce unmet demand for funds through a nearly 70% increase to TA on average over the next five years. States are more likely to benefit from this increase when they have a pipeline of projects to be funded. By preparing projects for funding several years ahead, states like Michigan have been able to address project concerns long before funding is set to be delivered and increase the speed at which the state can obligate funds, particularly when program changes result in more available funding.
Developing a pipeline of projects is also helpful when working to complete trail and active transportation networks; states can direct funds where they are most needed, anticipate subsequent priorities and clarify overall funding needs going forward to achieve connectivity objectives. Additionally, a new set-aside in the BIL provides states the flexibility to use up to 5% of their TA funds for technical assistance programs, which may help communities with the greatest needs and limited capacity to effectively access TA funds. In Kansas, all interested TA applicants must complete a concept plan before applying for funds, which gives the Department of Transportation the opportunity to conduct site visits, provide technical assistance and offer feedback to strengthen TA applications. The technical assistance set-aside could help states implement similar programs, bringing the benefits of trails and active transportation to more communities.

TA funds are critical to the creation of active transportation infrastructure, like trails, which safely connect people to each other, create economic vitality and promote health and outdoor mobility. The program innovations and increased TA funds included in the BIL provide states with new opportunities to increase their investments in trails while working to meet the unmet demand, in turn creating outsized economic benefits in trail communities. States must act expeditiously to make the most of these program changes and empower communities to deploy TA-eligible projects to realize the full potential of their TA investments.

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About TrADE

Since the inception of TE in 1991, RTC’s TrADE initiative has assisted stakeholders at the federal, state and local levels in understanding and implementing the TE/TA programs. Through technical support and the publication of our annual Transportation Alternatives Spending Report, RTC works with TA program managers, advocates and policymakers to support and promote the efficient use of these funds for trails, walking and biking. From 1996 to 2013, TrADE operated at the National Transportation Enhancements Clearinghouse as a partnership between RTC and the Federal Highway Administration.

For more info, visit rtc.li/TrADE-pubs or email spendingreport@railstotrails.org.