The Transportation Alternatives Set-Aside is the largest dedicated source of funding for trails, walking and biking in America. For more than 25 years, this program, formerly called Transportation Enhancements, has transformed the landscape of the nation. Critical investments made under the program have made it possible for states to build safe places to walk and bike—as a result, America now boasts more than 33,000 miles of multi-use trails, and communities are reaping the benefits. This infrastructure connects people to each other, creates economic vitality and promotes healthy outdoor mobility—saving money, freeing up road space and reducing pollution and health-care costs.\(^1\)

Since the program’s inception, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) has monitored how these funds have been invested and the projects that have been built under this program. The annual Transportation Alternatives Spending Report has been an important tool as RTC, states and the active transportation movement have sought to strengthen the program, improving the efficiency and efficacy of the investments made.

As a prime example, the 2017 report\(^2\) shows that 97 percent of the program’s money last year was used to fund trails, walking and biking. However, more funding is needed to meet demand and to connect individual trails into a network of trails. Trail and active transportation networks are fundamental to America’s success and, just like roads and rails, this infrastructure needs to be connected to form a system. Meeting America’s transportation needs requires robust, balanced multi-modal federal investment.

A Complex Era: Dedicated Funding for Walking and Biking

When Congress passed the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA), the legislation brought together roads, railroads, transit and other modes of transportation—including walking and biking—under one umbrella. Most notably, it established funding for Transportation Enhancement activities that included building rail-trails and other facilities for walking and biking, improving main streets left behind by the interstates, preserving transportation history, and mitigating environmental impacts of transportation.

ISTEA was an important development for trails, walking and biking—prior to the legislation, little was spent on walking and biking facilities. Using federal data, estimates indicate that from 1973–1991, a total of $40.7 million was spent on individual walking and biking projects that were not incidental to rebuilding a roadway. One year after ISTEA and the establishment of Transportation Enhancements, $93.9 million was spent on the same types of projects.

Transportation Enhancements continued to build America’s walking and biking infrastructure for the next two decades until, in July 2012, the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21) erased some of the gains that ISTEA introduced. That authorization of federal transportation law consolidated several active transportation programs under the “Transportation Alternatives” program, cutting its funding by a third, as compared with the investments made under Transportation Enhancements. Most significantly, however, MAP-21 made it easier for states to transfer funds out of Transportation Alternatives—a development that was further solidified by the most recent FAST (Fixing America’s Surface Transportation) Act legislation. Since MAP-21 was implemented, states have transferred $635 million out of Transportation Alternatives in just five years compared with $192 million that was transferred over the previous two decades (1992-2012).

Transportation Alternatives represents the single largest federal investment in trails and is among the smallest line items in surface transportation spending—the siphoning of funds away from the program paired with a reduced overall budget creates a funding loss that can be debilitating to states’ and communities’ plans for trails, walking and biking. This funding loss could encourage states to further disinvest from the program, leaving unspent money on the table and discouraging additional federal funding. Further, continuation of stagnant funding levels will continue to lessen the purchasing power and the impact of the program.

---

1 Quantifying the Benefits of Active Transportation. Available at: https://www.railstotrails.org/policy/active-transportation-for-america/quantifying-benefits/

2 FY 2017 Transportation Alternatives Annual Report. Available at: https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/transportation_alternatives/annual_reports/
The Present Era: Where We Are Today

In the decades since ISTEA, more than $10 billion has been programmed by states for trails, walking and biking. This funding provides a critical foundation for active transportation investments nationwide, however, it currently represents only 1.8 percent of the Federal-aid Highway Program—or less than two cents of each dollar spent on federal highways.

This modest level of dedicated funding has not only created thousands of new trails, but it also has revealed demand for more walking and biking infrastructure. RTC’s most recent analysis of Transportation Alternatives spending in 2017 found good news: for the first time in two decades, virtually all the program’s annual funds were obligated for projects. What’s more, since 2013, there has been a significant increase in the proportion invested in trails, walking and biking—more than 95 percent compared with 66 percent in the decades previous.

Unfortunately, however, this trend to focus the money does not adequately stretch the program’s ability to meet demand. In 2017, not even half of the projects that applied for Transportation Alternatives were funded, demonstrating a huge gap in funding available. More than 2,500 trails, walking and biking projects were left on the table.

In addition, while states are allocating dollars to active transportation, some are also diverting banked Transportation Alternative dollars to roads, highways, bridges, and more—even though the demand for safe walking and biking facilities is higher than available funding. Changes to federal law earlier this decade encouraged this phenomenon.

A New Era: Accelerating Infrastructure for Walking and Biking

Despite funding challenges, local communities want more safe places to walk and bike. Going forward, increased funding for Transportation Alternatives needs to be secured. Allowing states to transfer these funds for road projects is short sighted and limits the ability of an already small program to meet rising demand for walking and biking. More needs to be done to protect these funds, keeping them within the program and putting them to work as intended.

Even with those fixes, the numbers show that America needs more investment to meet demand. And to achieve that, America needs significant policy changes in the next reauthorization bill to strengthen, grow and safeguard active transportation funding, focusing investment where it is most needed and will produce even higher returns on investment.

RTC is calling for a visionary approach to the 2020 reauthorization of the FAST Act: an increase in funding dedicated for active transportation; eligibility for active transportation projects across federal transportation programs; and focused investment in completing trail and active transportation networks. Robust federal investment will provide a baseline of opportunity to meet demand for trails and active transportation across all states.

railstotrails.org/spendingreport