Lessons From Infrastructure Law Implementation

How to Prepare Active Transportation Infrastructure for Future Successes

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Authored by:

Scott Goldstein, Senior Director of Government Relations, Rails to Trails Conservancy
Elle Segal, Advocacy Outreach Director, Rails to Trails Conservancy
Isabelle Lord, Senior Advocacy Coordinator, Rails to Trails Conservancy

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Introduction

Overview

In 2021, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA)—also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL)—was hailed as being transformative by its supporters, both for its size ($1.2 trillion, with a total of $550 billion in transportation investments) and its scope, which included a wide variety of infrastructure types, as well as new programs and authorities. The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA)—which included the $3 billion Neighborhood Access and Equity (NAE) program and other transportation investments—was designed to complement the IIJA and provide additional investment and authorities. Together, these laws injected unprecedented funding into active transportation, empowered local and federal officials, and enabled decision-makers to start reimagining how government prioritizes transportation. As a result, America was poised for a new era of investment in active transportation.

This report is an assessment of the impact of the IIJA and IRA on active transportation, from their promise and high expectations to the reality of implementation and effects of a changing political environment. The report looks at what worked and what did not, identifies lessons learned, and recommends next steps for communities and advocates to maximize current and future investment opportunities.

Background

Prior to the IIJA, America's transportation system had experienced more than a decade of declining or stagnant investment, with active transportation funding particularly hard hit. MAP-21, signed into law in 2012, significantly reduced funding for active transportation and consolidated numerous programs. The FAST Act, which followed MAP-21 after several short extensions, generally continued the MAP-21 approach. In addition to reduced funding and program consolidation, the buying power of America's remaining transportation investments was also reduced due to inflation, growing maintenance needs and other demands. This was the context for Congressional consideration of transportation legislation in 2020 and 2021.

The IIJA and IRA significantly increased funds for active transportation (trails, walking and biking infrastructure) and gave the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) and states new authorities to make it safer and more convenient for people to walk, bike and be active outdoors. The laws provided nearly 70% more money for the foundational Transportation Alternatives program (which includes the Recreational Trails Program) from $850 million to an average of $1.44 billion per year and created the new Active Transportation Infrastructure Investment Program (ATIIP) to connect the nation's trail and active transportation system, along with new and improved competitive grant programs that benefit active transportation. These and other new or expanded programs—including for roadway safety, reconnecting communities and resilience, among others—included both clear eligibility for trails, walking and biking infrastructure and meaningful funding to deliver projects. During the initial implementation, the federal administration clearly prioritized this infrastructure within all eligible programs, providing unambiguous evidence that supportive policies, meaningful funding and proactive government partners would deliver active transportation investments.

Implementing such significant spending, while also creating new programs, proved to be a challenge. For some programs, such as ATIIP, it would take more than three years for the USDOT to announce awards. Meanwhile, many awards were announced very late into former President Joe Biden's administration, and thousands of projects that received awards did not have grant agreements as of the end of the term in January 2025.

When President Donald Trump's administration began, it announced a review of more than 3,200 USDOT grants—representing billions of dollars—awarded by the Biden administration that did not have signed grant agreements, as well as a review of formula programs. This review paused work on these grants—which included thousands of active transportation projects across multiple grant programs—creating chaos and thrusting local communities into limbo.

In July 2025, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act became law, rescinding unobligated funding for the Neighborhood Access and Equity (NAE) grant program, including $750 million for active transportation. This rescission was followed by the USDOT's cancellation of several trail, biking and walking projects, citing these projects as "hostile to motor vehicles" and contrary to the administration's priority of reducing vehicle congestion, marking a major shift from the previous administration's focus on climate, safety and equity.

The following sections will describe key successes, failures and missed opportunities, lessons learned, and next steps for the active-transportation advocacy community.

Successes From IIJA/IRA Infrastructure Investment

Significant funding and supportive policy through the IIJA as well as the IRA created unprecedented opportunities for communities nationwide to invest in multimodal transportation systems that offer walking, biking and trail options. With clear eligibility for active transportation infrastructure across several discretionary programs and formula funding policy reforms, these laws encouraged communities to be intentional and think creatively about how walking, biking and trails connect to and complement existing infrastructure.

This section will explore successful outcomes for active transportation that resulted from IIJA and IRA investments.

Clear Nationwide Demand for Active Transportation

Rails to Trails Conservancy has long documented substantial unmet demand for trails, walking and biking. The unprecedented level of funding through the IIJA and IRA inspired billions of dollars in applications for funding that far exceeded available resources, a proof point of this demand. The clear and overwhelming national demand for this infrastructure helped projects compete for funding and demonstrated the need for continued, sustained investment. The USDOT released data for unsuccessful applications (in addition to awarded applications) for several discretionary programs that makes it possible to compare the supply of funds and community demand for this funding. RTC reviewed three multimodal discretionary programs where walking, biking and trails performed best: Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD, formerly RAISE), Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A) and the Reconnecting Communities Pilot (RCP, also Reconnecting Neighborhoods, or RCN). There was a consistent oversubscription of applications, demonstrating unmet demand for projects with active transportation elements. For BUILD, SS4A construction/implementation and RCP/RCN, 1,089 projects were awarded versus 5,914 applicants, meaning around 18% of applications, or fewer than 1 in 5, were funded.

Planning and Community Engagement Are Essential to Leveraging Opportunities

The available evidence—across different discretionary grants and multiple years of awards—is clear; places that won grants had readied themselves for these opportunities by investing in planning, project development and community engagement. This preparatory work involved diligent, often decades-long planning processes that began long before Congress developed the IIJA and IRA. Passage of these laws provided these places with an unprecedented opportunity to advance or complete projects, and the preparatory work of planning and community engagement enabled these places to develop successful applications to highly competitive grant programs. Meanwhile, places that had not invested in planning and community engagement were both less ready to submit competitive applications, and less successful at winning awards and realizing the benefits of completed projects.

When the Capital Trails Coalition (railstotrails.org/ctc) was founded in 2016, partners recognized that in order to achieve a large scale vision for trails, walking and biking, they needed to create a detailed, standardized process for gathering data and developing the criteria for inclusion in the trail network. They met with planners from each jurisdiction to standardize data and develop a comprehensive network map. This process created widespread buy-in, culminating with the regional metropolitan planning organization (MPO) formally adopting the coalition's vision of 800+ miles of connected trails across the national capital region. This longstanding and detailed planning and outreach helped make the coalition well prepared for the IIJA, and in 2023, the coalition was able to successfully win a $25 million RAISE grant ("Creating Equitable Connections on the Capital Trails Network"). This investment in planning certainly played a big role in ensuring that they were prepared to take advantage of funding once it was available.

Atlanta, Georgia, presents us with another example of how advanced planning helped spur successful funding efforts. Officials and stakeholders developed a vision of a region connected by active transportation and centered around the Atlanta Beltline, a 22-mile loop linking parks, transit and 45 neighborhoods. Local organizing for the Beltline dated back to the early 2000s, with the creation of the Friends of the Beltline. After the group started fundraising and community engagement efforts, the project began to receive significant political and philanthropic support. In 2005, the Beltline was approved by Fulton County, the Atlanta City Council and the city's public school system. They approved the official redevelopment plan and created the Beltline Tax Allocation District (TAD) to provide funding. The first plan for the Beltline was officially created in 2013 and then updated in 2024. This planning and community engagement ensured that there was alignment across jurisdictions, as well as broad community and political support for the project long before significant federal funding became available.

As part of the planning process, the City of Atlanta identified Pryor Street as both a hot spot for roadway safety incidents as well as a key connection between downtown and the Beltline's Southside Trail. Subsequently, the city began to design a project to improve safety for pedestrians and bicyclists within this important section of the network. All this planning positioned Atlanta to win a $30 million SS4A grant in 2022 for the "Central and Pryor Safe Streets Corridors" project, which will create a safe walking and bicycling connection between downtown Atlanta and the Southside Trail corridor. Additionally, in fiscal year (FY) 2023, the Beltline received a $25 million RAISE grant to connect the Beltline to nearby transit opportunities. This early discretionary funding success was made possible through deep coordination by the Atlanta Regional Council (the regional MPO), the City of Atlanta, community organizations, Beltline staff and political leaders.

Stronger, Larger Transportation Alternatives Delivered

After significant cuts in MAP-21 and then years of flat funding, the IIJA provided nearly 70% more for the Transportation Alternatives (TA) program—increasing it from $850 million to an average of $1.44 billion per year—along with constraints on transfers out of the program so that more TA funding would be used for TA projects. This increase to the nation's largest dedicated funding source for active transportation restored the buying power of the program, and it occurred at a time when communities had invested in planning and were ready to leverage new resources. The increase also brought with it new and unprecedented opportunities for states and regions to invest in this infrastructure, to innovate with new approaches to active transportation funding and to leverage additional state and local funding sources.

While the funding increase offset past cuts and inflation, it was not enough to meet today's needs, as evidenced by the fact that demand for TA funding currently exceeds available funds by four times as much. This demand makes it clear that the larger and stronger TA program is working; TA remains the essential foundation of America's investment in active transportation and deserves continued, robust investment.

As a result of the increase in funding, many states are making significant progress on the backlog of active transportation projects, and the overall average award size increased to $1.79 million, compared to $776,381 in FY 2021. Several states are leveraging the new funding to increase the maximum size of their awards, enabling investments in larger projects that are often the biggest barriers to connectivity.

Texas created a large-scale bicycle and pedestrian project category and is a great example of how states are innovating and leveraging the additional TA funds. The awarded amounts under this new category are between $5 million and $25 million, and in the last funding cycle, 56% of Texas' overall awarded funds were for large-scale projects. This new category makes it possible for communities to plan and construct larger-scale networks that address connectivity gaps while increasing access, safety and mobility options.

The additional funding and limits on transfers have increased the number of projects being built. Of the states that report data for RTC's annual Transportation Alternatives Data Exchange report, 2,587 TA projects were funded during the 2022–2024 time frame compared to 1,675 projects for 2019–2021—a substantial increase in overall projects.

Clear Legislative History and Language Strengthen Implementation

Often, federal agencies and courts are tasked with determining the intent of unclear statutes. Fortunately, with regard to active transportation, the IIJA and IRA included clear language specifying active transportation eligibility in formula and discretionary grants, as well as explicit direction for local, state and federal governments to promote active transportation, including by improving safety for vulnerable road users.

For example, active transportation is eligible across multiple programs, including new or expanded programs, in addition to TA, such as the Active Transportation Infrastructure Investment Program (ATIIP); the Neighborhood Access and Equity (NAE) program; BUILD (formerly RAISE); SS4A; Reconnecting Communities, both the Bridge Formula and discretionary Investment program; Carbon Reduction; Promoting Resilient Operations for Transformative, Efficient, and Cost-Saving Transportation (PROTECT); and Infrastructure for Rebuilding America (INFRA), among others. Active transportation projects performed well under the IIJA for several reasons: clear eligibility, flexibility/broad applicability of active transportation and creative funding categories.

The clear eligibility of active transportation activities across programs with differing requirements and merit criteria—and the success of active transportation projects within programs that included eligibility for several modes of transportation—demonstrated that trails, walking and biking serve as a solution for several needs, including but not limited to safety, accessibility, economic development, quality of life and disaster resilience. There are several examples of projects awarded under different discretionary programs that address unique program goals using active transportation. One example is the Promoting Resilient Operations for Transformative, Efficient and Cost-Saving Transportation (PROTECT) grant program, which focuses on transportation and climate resiliency, including making transportation more prepared for flooding, rising sea levels, natural disasters and more. In the spring of 2024, grants were awarded to 80 communities. Ultimately, 11 out of the 80 funded projects include elements of walking and biking infrastructure, accounting for around 25% of funding. The City of Newport, Rhode Island, received $11 million in PROTECT grant dollars to restore the beloved Newport Cliff Walk, which requires much-needed repairs after facing wear and tear from years of coastal storms. This grant will go toward stabilizing two sections of the walk that collapsed in 2022 and have since remained in disrepair, disrupting the connection along the coast.

Further, the IIJA directed the USDOT and states to take action in promoting active transportation through requirements such as the new Vulnerable Road User special rule. This special rule requires states where 15% or more traffic deaths are deaths of vulnerable road users to spend 15% or more of formula safety funding on projects that improve the safety of these road users. As of this writing, 31 states and territories are subject to this special rule and have obligated over $350 million. In addition to statutory language, during debate over the IIJA and IRA, members of Congress expressed concern about the ongoing roadway safety crisis that disproportionately impacted people walking, biking and rolling, and the importance of providing safety for these vulnerable road users through infrastructure investments. This legislative history and statutory language provided clear direction to the federal government, as well as local and state governments, to invest in active transportation.

Discretionary Grants Demonstrated a Different Way of Prioritizing

As mentioned above, the IIJA created or expanded multiple discretionary grant programs that funded trails, walking and biking infrastructure. Each program was designed to address gaps in the existing funding structures. In many cases, local communities and other nontraditional recipients such as nonprofits were eligible to apply for funding directly, and to manage the project if the application was successful. Despite some challenges that are discussed in the next section, discretionary grants proved exceptionally popular, as evidenced by the high degree of competitiveness. Communities clearly saw value in having direct access to resources, to larger grants that enabled them to make investments at scale, and to the opportunity to invest in projects designed to meet the new program eligibility. The popularity of these grants and the multimodal projects they will deliver provides proof of the concept that there is demand for community-driven transportation priorities and that trails, walking and biking infrastructure are critical to a variety of outcomes. The degree of program success is influenced by other factors described in this document, including political will and program administration.

Failures and Missed Opportunities

Despite the successes above, the story of IIJA and IRA active transportation investments also includes some failures, missed opportunities and setbacks. It is important to identify and understand these issues to learn and improve program design and advocacy.

Active Transportation Not Yet Politically Mainstream

Many policymakers and influential stakeholders continue to oppose federal active-transportation funding, despite significant demand and investment in trails, walking and biking in every corner of the country. While federal officials generally express support for this infrastructure given its broad popularity, opponents of federal funding for active transportation believe that it is not the federal role, and states and localities should fund it. This opposition to federal investment comes even though active transportation funding remains a small share of federal funding and is not enough to meet the demand.

Investments in roadway safety illustrate how this opposition manifests in policymaking. The United States is experiencing a roadway safety crisis, and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) lists many types of active transportation infrastructure as proven countermeasures, yet leaders in Congress and in the USDOT have suggested that this infrastructure is not a federal priority. With the IIJA expiring in 2026, Congress is beginning to draft a new transportation law, and the current House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Sam Graves stated that the new law will not include funding for " ... bike paths or walking paths." Meanwhile, influential stakeholders are advocating for the consolidation of TA with other transportation programs, diluting its impact and eliminating the only dedicated source of active transportation funding and pitting this infrastructure against other transportation investments.

Active transportation advocates were thrilled when Congress created the new Active Transportation Infrastructure Investment Program (ATIIP) as part of the IIJA. ATIIP is the only program dedicated to investing at sufficient scale in projects that connect active transportation networks and spines, providing the large-scale grants necessary to address multiple gaps in safe walking and biking routes. Congress authorized $200 million annually ($1 billion total) as part of the IIJA; however, thus far it has only allocated $45 million. When the FHWA announced awards, the $45 million was oversubscribed by applications at a ratio of 40 to 1, with 350 communities requesting $1.8 billion. Despite this overwhelming demand, Congress has repeatedly failed to provide additional funding.

Restrictions on TA Transfers Did Not Succeed Absent Accountability

In addition to increasing funding for TA, the IIJA constrained transfers of funds out of TA to other programs with the intention of closing loopholes that had historically prevented TA from reaching its full potential. Specifically, the IIJA required states to demonstrate to FHWA that there was insufficient demand for TA funds. After initially declining, transfers of TA funding to other programs began to increase.

Below is a timeline of developments by fiscal year (FY):

- **For FY 2022**, the FHWA established a moratorium that prohibited transfers, and there were no inter-program transfers as a result. For FY 2023, the FHWA implemented the Congressional requirement that transfers be limited to instances where states demonstrate insufficient demand for TA-eligible projects, requiring states to seek approval from FHWA headquarters for proposed transfers.
- **FY 2023** saw five states approved by the FHWA for inter-program transfers, totaling $85 million. This was approximately 50% of the inter-program transfer rate from FY 2021.
- **In FY 2024**, FHWA delegated responsibility to approve transfers to the division offices. Twelve states were approved for inter-program transfers totaling over $250 million. The FY 2024 inter-program transfer rate was 18.4%, compared to 6.4% in FY 2023. This steep increase in transfers, coupled with the continued demand for TA funding, raises concerns about the priorities of state departments of transportation (DOTs) and whether they view active transportation as essential infrastructure. It also suggests that FHWA division offices are not well suited to ensure accountability to Congress' intent that transfers be limited to situations where there is insufficient demand.

The IIJA restrictions on transfers depended on faithful execution of a process fix; the new Congressional requirement that states run a competition and find demand lacking. This was expected to virtually end transfers because demand for such grants is very robust. However, the evidence suggests that process reforms only work if the responsible agency provides oversight and holds states accountable to congressional intent. When USDOT headquarters delegated authority to the FHWA division offices in FY 2024, each office was empowered to oversee itself. The level of oversight and monitoring decreased, and the level of transfers increased. Division offices are known to have close relationships with state DOTs and to often take very permissive views of state DOT requests. This represents both a broader challenge to the active transportation movement as well as to the effectiveness of the IIJA transfer reforms.

Insufficient Accountability and Transparency Regarding State Decisions

The overwhelming majority of federal transportation funding takes the form of flexible formula funds that are controlled by state DOTs and are designed to allow states flexibility in how they select projects and administer funds, with minimal transparency and oversight. Under the IIJA, states received over $270 billion in highway formula funding, whereas the USDOT administered approximately $150 billion worth of discretionary grants, which have strict project-selection criteria and transparency requirements. Each state and region has its own process for selecting and administering projects with formula funds (TA is structured as a 10% set-aside within the Surface Transportation Block Grant formula).

As a result of the formula structure, it is difficult to track project selection and understand how it may be tied to federal or state goals. However, we can track outcomes. Overall, the vast majority of funding has been allocated to highway expansion and maintenance, and only a very small proportion of formula funding has been allocated to trails, walking and biking—and the latter mostly because Congress set aside a share for that purpose. When we look at national performance goals of safety, congestion, system maintenance and environmental sustainability, we see little progress. Under current law, there are no effective methods for the federal government or the public to hold states accountable for these outcomes.

Storytelling Did Not Overcome Siloing of Issues at Federal Level

Active transportation projects provide numerous benefits, including improved safety, economic opportunity, health outcomes and overall quality of life. Throughout the course of IIJA and IRA implementation to date, this infrastructure was also described by supporters as essential to addressing climate change, improving equitable access to opportunity and outcomes, and reconnecting communities, among other benefits. While a variety of stakeholders, public officials, decision-makers and media articulated the numerous benefits, it proved challenging for these benefits to individually and collectively break through. At the federal level, issues tend to be siloed, and this siloing exists across the federal transportation policy ecosystem. Among elected officials, siloes exist as a result of committee assignments and relationships with stakeholder groups. A member of Congress on a committee with jurisdiction over vehicle technology is more likely to engage on roadway safety issues from the perspective of vehicle technology than active transportation infrastructure. As a result, it can be difficult for a story or narrative to cut across the siloes and resonate deeply into the policymaking ecosystem.

In some cases, the multiple benefits of active transportation may complicate storytelling efforts. Active transportation infrastructure improves roadway safety, reduces emissions and improves access to opportunity for disadvantaged populations. While the Trump administration has committed to reducing roadway fatalities, it has canceled or paused active transportation projects in what appears to be opposition to the role of these projects in reducing emissions and improving equitable outcomes. Each administration is expected to set its own goals and priorities, and it is an ongoing challenge to the active transportation community to tell the story of how this infrastructure meets today's goals.

Funding May Not Be Durable

While Congress and presidential administrations have long had authority to rescind, cancel, or amend funding, this authority has historically been used sparingly. Recent actions by Congress and the Trump administration have changed the calculation and sent signals to transportation stakeholders that they may not be able to count on federal funding.

As mentioned earlier, in mid-2025, Congress rescinded all unobligated NAE funding, including over $750 million for large-scale trail and active-transportation grants. When this became law, popular projects across the country—many in states and districts represented by members of Congress, who voted for this rescission—lost significant funding, and their future is now in doubt. In January, the USDOT announced that it was pausing work on over 3,200 grants awarded by the previous administration and reviewing these awards for consistency with the new administration's priorities. Such a large-scale pause is unprecedented, has sowed chaos for active transportation projects and will likely increase costs for those projects that are eventually allowed to proceed. Further, the USDOT has canceled several trail, walking and biking projects, and may amend and remove active transportation elements for several more. While many, if not most, of the paused projects have been approved to resume grant agreement negotiations, it is not clear whether or to what extent the USDOT will require substantial changes to projects, including the removal of active transportation elements. The active transportation community, including RTC, worked very hard to oppose clawbacks and cancellations. This uncertainty around federal funding is itself unprecedented, and project sponsors and grant recipients may ultimately choose to adjust their interest in applying for federal funding in the future. That said, RTC hopes that the resumption of negotiations and eventual completion of projects will restore confidence in this funding and maintain its durability.

Discretionary Programs Can Be Complicated and Costly, Undermining Effectiveness

The IIJA created or expanded more than 100 competitive discretionary grant programs, and expanded eligibility to make local communities and nonprofits eligible to apply for certain programs. As described above, this new discretionary funding catalyzed local innovation and allowed the federal government to support a variety of projects—including active transportation—that had not been previously eligible for federal funding or were difficult to fund with existing programs. Through these grant programs and the new or expanded funding they provided, communities were able to demonstrate the desire and capacity to lead their investment strategies, as well as the essential role of trails, walking and biking infrastructure in achieving community outcomes.

However, discretionary grants were extremely competitive despite the significant funding, and often featured complex applications designed to ensure projects met Biden administration goals. As a result, many communities grew frustrated with the cost—in time and resources—of applying for funding relative to the small chance of succeeding. Further, when a community was successful, they faced administrative burdens to manage the federal funding. Finally, USDOT staff charged with creating and operating these new programs struggled to meet the demand for technical assistance. Compared to the relatively simple formula programs operated by state DOTs, the discretionary programs were seen by many states and communities as onerous. In response, as Congress considers the next transportation law, state DOTs are requesting that discretionary funding be reallocated to the formula programs. Meanwhile, as many project sponsors confront uncertainty around their federal grants and future budgets, support for discretionary programs is limited and their future uncertain.

Lessons Learned

Invest in Planning

Having plans and community and local support in place makes it easier to both successfully apply for grants and leverage additional formula and TA funding. Planning is relatively affordable, compared to construction, and allows communities to be ready to take advantage of funding when it becomes available.

Planning consists of a number of elements, including developing and regularly updating strategic goals that inform priority corridors and project selection. These plans should be adopted by the state and regional authorities in the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) or Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), which states are required to create. Communities may also consider conducting project development and design to advance individual projects so that they are truly "shovel ready." Community engagement is essential throughout the planning process to ensure both public support and sufficient political will.

In December 2018, Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb announced the Next Level Trails grant program, which was designed to provide a historic level of trail funding across Indiana. This initiative catalyzed trail planning and investment across the state. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress approved the American Rescue Plan (ARP), which included flexible funding for state and local projects. The success of the Next Level Trails initiative ensured Indiana was prepared to leverage these flexible funds for trails, and indeed the state allocated $60 million in ARP funds to the Next Level Trails program.

DOT Decision-Makers Have Significant Influence Over Discretionary Outcomes

Decision-makers at states and the USDOT have enormous influence over how discretionary grants are implemented, and the benefit of these programs to active transportation can vary widely with each election and subsequent appointments. USDOT leadership can redesign applications—including adding, promoting or removing merit criteria within the constraints of the law—choose how and where to provide technical assistance and public engagement to promote funding opportunities, and use the "bully pulpit" of the USDOT Secretary to send national signals about administration priorities and preferences.

Administrations that are proactively supportive of active transportation infrastructure will make it easy for communities to successfully apply for multimodal discretionary grants, whereas administrations that are less proactively supportive may design applications that are especially challenging. USDOT leadership will also influence the hiring of career staff as well as the degree of authority and autonomy those civil service experts will have in their roles. Similarly, decision-makers at state DOTs and MPOs are also important as they set local priorities, determine which applications to submit to the USDOT, and have enormous influence over USDOT decision-makers in how they design grant programs. State DOTs and MPOs are direct decision-makers for how federal resources are invested in their jurisdictions, including for TA, underscoring their significance to the funding process.

As an example, under the Biden administration, the USDOT prioritized and awarded grants for active transportation across multimodal programs, both for stand-alone projects and for elements that were part of larger projects, and the secretary traveled the country highlighting this infrastructure. The Trump administration has taken a different approach. It did not award any stand-alone active transportation infrastructure in the first round of the BUILD awards (or during Trump's first term), and the secretary has publicly—and through grant application designs—stated a preference for motor vehicle infrastructure over active transportation.

Discretionary Grants Remain Important Catalysts

Discretionary grants are important catalysts for project development, inspire local and regional collaboration and federal innovation, and produce consequential large-scale active transportation projects.

As an example, dozens of local communities submitted applications for over $3 billion in NAE and RCP funding intended to reconnect neighborhoods divided by infrastructure. Though the substantial majority of the funding was ultimately rescinded, these communities saw the opportunity for trails, biking and walking to stitch neighborhoods back together and to leverage a significant amount of funding for the large-scale investments necessary to build bridges, decks and tunnels over divisive infrastructure. Ultimately, the USDOT awarded a combined $834 million, or 25% of the total $3.3 billion in funding, to projects focused on trails, walking and biking. Eighty-five percent of the 132 projects include elements that account for active transportation. Investments of this scale would not have been possible without such a unique combination of program authority and level of funding.

Many discretionary grants are designed as multimodal programs, and this structure has proven to yield a tremendous number of applicants applying for active-transportation-oriented projects as part of larger multimodal projects. This enables local communities to contextualize active transportation as part of a larger package and enables the USDOT to invest in this infrastructure, even when it may not be inclined to support stand-alone active transportation projects. Even smaller discretionary grants are significantly larger than available funding through the foundational TA program. Discretionary grants are therefore critical in completing large gaps in active transportation networks and spines.

Finally, discretionary grants often are implemented alongside federal tools to support development of competitive applications. These tools can provide communities valuable insights into local and regional challenges that may prove useful in advancing active transportation. Administrations will typically create tools that align with administration priorities. As an example, the Biden administration created the Equitable Transportation Community Explorer to help communities assess and address transportation disadvantage. This tool was part of the Justice40 initiative and was designed to both help discretionary applicants respond to relevant merit criteria and help communities target investments to improve related outcomes. As of this writing, the Trump administration has yet to produce its own tools; however, it included updated and detailed language within the SS4A application, describing the behavior and technological outcomes it supports as part of its roadway safety efforts.

Case Study: RAISE Program Demonstration Strategy in Baltimore, Maryland

Within the RAISE program, eligible projects ranged from port infrastructure, transit improvements, roads and bridges to trail infrastructure. Despite the wide range of possible projects, applications supporting biking, walking and trails performed well in all rounds. In particular, FY 2023 RAISE grants illustrated the transformative impact of connected trail, walking and biking infrastructure in rural, suburban and urban communities nationwide, with 80% of awards addressing one or more elements of bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure and nearly $400 million invested to solely fund bicycle and pedestrian projects. This demonstrated that active transportation projects could be successful when competing with other more traditional modes of infrastructure such as bridges and highways.

SS4A Successful Demonstration Category: By offering distinct application categories for planning, demonstration and implementation, SS4A made way for an increased number of "quick build," or temporary, pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure projects. Each year under BIL, the USDOT refined the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) language for this program to encourage applicants to apply for grants that supported their projects at each phase. The City of Baltimore is an example of a community that took advantage of the opportunity to test quick-build projects through the demonstration category of the program. Using an FY 2023 SS4A Planning and Demonstration award, Baltimore plans to implement pop-up Complete Streets projects within their High Injury Network of streets. One pilot strategy includes temporary lane and street closures. The demonstration category gives the city the opportunity to be innovative and creative and change the way they usually plan and implement projects. Across the country, many local elected officials like these quick-build projects because they demonstrate safety outcomes without a high level of investment or permanence and support conversations with community members who may have been initially hesitant about the investment. The popularity of demonstration grants suggests that this category could also work well in other programs.

Storytelling Is Critical

Telling the story of the many benefits of active transportation projects is as essential as it is challenging. Policymakers are confronting a 24/7 media ecosystem across social and traditional media that makes it very difficult for a story to break through.

Still, storytelling remains critical to translating complex programs and large dollar amounts into everyday reality and lived experiences. In part because of the challenges of breaking through, it is very important for stakeholders to communicate regularly, across all media channels, and repeatedly describe the progress and benefits of projects. When projects are complete, it is equally important for stakeholders to uplift the experience of people using the infrastructure and match those with the expected project benefits.

Trail projects provide numerous opportunities for storytelling. Community engagement during the planning process tells the story of what is possible and what the community is trying to achieve. Winning a grant is another opportunity to uplift the benefits of the project that helped allow it to successfully compete for funding. A project groundbreaking is another opportunity to keep the community updated while also demonstrating progress on delivering the project.

Additionally, after construction begins, regularly sharing photos or descriptions of progress and project milestones will help keep a drumbeat of support as the project advances. When the project is complete, a celebration or other opening ceremony, followed by regular photos and stories of the trail/infrastructure in use, will keep the community both engaged and reminded of why it made the investment. Before and after photos and stories can also serve to reinforce the value of the project and its transformative potential and impact.

Political Will and Political Leadership Are Critical

As described above, decision-makers at all levels of government have enormous influence over program design and outcomes. However, their authority is derived from their political leadership, whose willingness to promote and support active transportation is not guaranteed. Creating sustained public support for this infrastructure is essential to pressuring local, state and federal political leadership to consistently prioritize active transportation infrastructure. Sustained public support is also necessary to encourage candidates supportive of active transportation infrastructure to seek office and to subsequently invest in this infrastructure, and to hold policymakers accountable to the communities they serve.

At the federal level, the administration and Congress can influence funding by sending signals through public and private comments as well as their policy proposals. While the secretary of transportation has broad authority to implement programs created by Congress, they must act consistent with the president's priorities and be mindful of congressional interest in program and project outcomes. Whether and how members of Congress and the president discuss active transportation—including by attending events, visiting project sites, introducing legislation or engaging in private communications with the secretary—their communications will shape how the secretary chooses to leverage their authority in support of this infrastructure.

Similarly, state and local political leaders articulate a vision, set local goals and appoint transportation officials tasked with selecting and administering the projects to achieve those goals, and raise local transportation funds. Long before a project can be considered for a federal discretionary award or formula funding, it must have the local political support to be selected for regional plans as well as design and engineering. The willingness of state DOTs and local/regional transportation officials to prioritize and advance projects flows from the support of the public and all levels of civic and elected leadership.

As mentioned above, Congress rescinded nearly $3 billion for the IRA's NAE grant program, including $750 million for trail, walking and biking projects. As trail funding was proposed to be eliminated from their own districts, members of Congress did not fight back, instead putting their heads down and voting for the rescission as part of the One Big Beautiful Bill. Meanwhile, a similar effort to sell public lands as part of the same bill failed under the pressure of bipartisan pushback, with members of Congress publicly fighting to preserve public lands.

At the same time, the USDOT was undertaking reviews of previously awarded grants, including thousands of trail, walking and biking projects across multiple programs, and had clearly stated that it was considering canceling or modifying active transportation projects. The NAE rescission sent a signal to the USDOT that there would not be a political cost if it were to pursue its efforts to cancel or modify these projects.

As of this writing, the USDOT project reviews are ongoing; however, the department has announced the cancellation of several trail and active transportation projects and has used unusually strong language to describe some of these projects as "hostile to motor vehicles." It is difficult to assess from public information the full scope of the cancellations and the rationale. Department officials have not described why some active transportation projects were chosen for cancellation while many others were allowed to proceed. Nor have department officials described how the USDOT weighed the safety benefit of canceled projects against the administration's stated priority of vehicle throughput. In addition, projects have been canceled in states and regions represented by officials from both major political parties, suggesting there is no clear political rationale for the cancellations.

Beyond canceled projects, the USDOT has periodically announced its approval of previously awarded grants following grant reviews and has since said that the review process is nearly complete. The department has not made clear whether approved projects will still be required to remove project elements in order to proceed and, if so, how many projects and what elements are impacted. This lack of transparency makes it difficult to reach firm conclusions; however, two factors appear relevant: 1) political leadership, and 2) public and political support. While their rationale may not be clear, departmental political leadership are choosing to cancel some projects and allow others. Additionally, based on the department's stated priorities, it is reasonable to conclude that there would be more cancellations and alterations but for the support of members of Congress and local communities for this infrastructure. Therefore, robust public and political support for trail, walking and biking infrastructure is likely to reduce the number of cancellations and alterations.

The Circuit Trails (railstotrails.org/circuit) network in the Greater Philadelphia region offers a positive vision and example of harnessing political will to support successful outcomes. Support from the regional MPO, local elected officials, local advocates and philanthropic entities has been instrumental in obtaining $41.7 million in federal funding for projects in FY 2023, including a $19 million RAISE grant. The support has also been critical to the project's repeated success over the years in securing funds, dating back to the initial grants given in 2009 under TIGER, the program that originated RAISE.

In Utah, multiple MPOs, the state DOT and advocacy organizations have been instrumental in successfully advocating for state funding and statewide trail-network planning. Partially as a result of this collaboration and broad support, the state received a nearly $10 million RAISE planning grant for the "Utah Trail Network Four Corners Planning Study" in 2024 and a $25 million RAISE grant in 2023.

Local Match Continues to Be an Obstacle

Identifying the required local match—often 20% of the cost of a project—is one of the main challenges communities face in accessing federal funding. In late 2023, RTC polled nearly 400 of its partners on barriers to federal funding; the poll identified raising local matching funds as the top challenge, followed closely by grant writing and project management capacity. These and other challenges left many communities overwhelmed and unable or uninterested in applying for federal funding.

Local match is the portion of a project cost that must be provided by the grant recipient (generally a state or local community). Congress requires a local match for most federal transportation funding to ensure that communities are supportive of a project and have “skin in the game.” The IIJA included some different reforms across programs to reduce the local match burden, including waiving or reducing the match for certain disadvantaged communities and allowing certain federal funds to count for a local match, among others.

While the local match has always presented challenges, the increased interest from lower-capacity communities for IIJA funding has both highlighted and exacerbated this challenge. As more communities determined that they want this infrastructure and sought to take advantage of new federal programs, they were forced to confront the requirement to identify a local source for 20% of the project cost. Even accounting for IIJA reforms, and the relative affordability of active transportation infrastructure compared to other larger projects, this issue presented a major obstacle to enabling communities to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the IIJA.

Recognizing this challenge, RTC has proposed reducing the local match for the largest source of federal funding for trails, walking and biking—TA. The active transportation community should consider how it can engage Congress to reform the historical requirement of a 20% local match to ensure that more communities can take advantage of future federal funding.

Appropriations Is Not a Viable Strategy for New Programs

ATIIP was created to deliver the connected active-transportation network of spine trails and community connections that other programs were unable to deliver. The IIJA authorized Congress to appropriate $200 million each year for ATIIP. While this was a significant victory, subjecting this new program to annual appropriations ultimately limited its impact. Members of the Congressional appropriations committees were once considered among the most influential; today, however, the overall appropriations process is dysfunctional, and Congress rarely passes all 12 appropriations bills on time, often relying on continuing resolutions (CRs) to fund the government. Additionally, the IIJA provided advanced appropriations for several programs, reducing the import of the appropriations committees to the transportation appropriations process and ultimately leaving little room for newly authorized programs such as ATIIP to receive funding.

New Programs Demonstrated Different Transportation Future; Intentional Investment Required to Realize

The IIJA created or expanded over a hundred discretionary programs and many more formula programs that together were designed to demonstrate what it looks like to modernize our transportation priorities and make different types of investments. The projects that were chosen are the manifestation of this new approach. Change is often difficult, and these investments and programs also demonstrate how important it will be for policymakers to intentionally design and implement programs for the future they wish to realize. Fortunately, the IIJA resulted in the planning and construction of thousands of active transportation projects around the country that will be the real and living examples of what is possible for generations and a model for a future administration or Congress.

What Do We Do Next?

As Congress prepares to write the next surface transportation law, RTC is advocating for a bold reauthorization agenda (rtc.li/reauthorization) that will sustain and grow the active transportation programs that have proven so impactful for communities. This agenda provides Congress with a clear path to providing communities of all types with connected, safe, and convenient active-transportation infrastructure.

However, to fully realize the vision of a walkable and bikeable America, we must harness the lessons from the IIJA and IRA development and implementation as they apply to all levels of government. We cannot sit still and expect Congress to approve new and expanded active-transportation programs. We must use the lessons learned to ensure that local, state and federal governments have the support, pressure and tools needed and are held to the appropriate and necessary levels of accountability.

Additionally, it is imperative that we:

- Demonstrate consistent public support so all levels of government have the political will, and to ensure that the projects being planned and constructed today become the real-life foundations of political support and engagement tomorrow.
- Ensure that communities use and cherish this infrastructure and that policymakers at all levels understand the importance of this infrastructure to the people they represent.
- Tell the story of this infrastructure and its transformative impact, even when it is hard and seems like it is not breaking through.
- Cultivate the next generation of civic and political leaders so they are prepared to leverage positions of influence to support this infrastructure when the moment is right or funding is available.
- Continue to invest in planning so there are projects ready for funding and communities ready to reap their benefits.

The IIJA and IRA implementation offers active transportation supporters and advocates insight into how to prepare for and leverage federal funding, as well as cautionary lessons regarding the reliability of federal funding sources. Further, with the IRA's NAE program substantially repealed by Congress, and the IIJA expiring in September 2026, the future of federal funding levels and program structure is unknown. Nevertheless, it is essential to keep investing in this infrastructure to meet the demand.

The following are recommended steps that active transportation supporters can take to both prepare for and manage a changing federal funding landscape and identify other funding sources.

Build Political Support at the State and Local Levels

Trails and active transportation need to be understood as essential, and supporters need to build the political will across all levels of decision-making—from city councils to state DOTs to the halls of Congress and the USDOT. This work must start immediately—with organization at the local community level for projects that can then lend itself to advocacy at the regional (MPOs), state (DOTs) and federal (Congress and the USDOT) levels when needed. It also includes substantively engaging with state DOTs—overwhelmingly the most trusted resource for policymakers—to ensure they understand the demand for this infrastructure and are prepared to support further investment with funding as well as all aspects of project development and design.

Identify and Raise New State and Local Funding

It is critical for local communities and states to raise transportation revenue—even in an era of robust federal funding yet especially so in an era of federal uncertainty or reduced funding. These local funds can both directly fund critical projects and provide the local match required to receive federal funds.

Across the country, communities, regions and states have found innovative ways to raise local revenue. This includes ballot measures, tax allocation districts, state programs, toll revenue and other innovative programs. In many places, states have been leaders in trail, walking and biking investments. Governors and legislatures of both parties have chosen to make meaningful investments that provide immediate and durable benefits while also making it possible to leverage federal funding, should it become available.

Plan for the Future

As described earlier, meaningful planning and project development allows communities to identify, develop and build support for projects. Elevating projects for inclusion into STIPs and TIPs helps ensure they are eligible for certain funding when it becomes available. This preparatory work is essential to help communities, regions and states identify key projects and build support for those projects with stakeholders and decision-makers.

In many states and regions, specific trail and active transportation plans drive internal resources and help to prioritize the development of a connected network. Often, the planning process identifies multiple community benefits of trail, walking and biking projects that can make the projects very competitive when funding becomes available. This work can support the identification and creation of new state and local revenue streams and ensure that projects are elevated to the regional and state plans that are necessary for state and federal formula funding.

Engage Policymakers and Advocate for Active Transportation

This report describes a variety of ways in which active transportation funding benefits communities of all types yet struggles to receive commensurate funding and political support. It is essential that policymakers hear from local communities—their constituents—about their support for active transportation, including specific projects and the federal funding and programs that are necessary to make the projects a reality.

RTC has developed a bold and detailed policy agenda that will deliver the active transportation America deserves. The priorities are as follows:

1. Strengthen and grow Transportation Alternatives and the Recreational Trails Program.
2. Secure dedicated funding for the Active Transportation Infrastructure Investment Program.
3. Strategically deploy multimodal federal discretionary grants.

Read the full agenda on RTC's website (rtc.li/reauthorization).

Conclusion

The decisions made today will determine the size, scope and impact of tomorrow's active-transportation infrastructure investments and the role of active transportation in the next surface transportation law. The development and implementation of the IIJA and IRA offer important insights into how communities, stakeholders and governments can build a walkable, bikeable future; lay the groundwork for renewed federal investment; and take advantage of that investment, should it materialize.

This report identifies specific lessons learned for the entire active transportation movement. RTC will apply these lessons to its work and will review its existing policy proposals and engagement strategies to ensure they align with these findings.

RTC recognizes that policy proposals relevant to the political moment today may not be enough to fully realize the active transportation vision of all American communities. Our movement must continue to candidly assess what works and what does not, and to adjust tactics and strategies accordingly.