

FAST Act

Thank you everyone who commented to our congressional delegation on the transportation bill. The House and Senate on Dec. 4 approved a final five-year, \$305 billion Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act transportation authorization.

While it doesn't have everything we asked for we do have a 5-year transportation bill, the first time in a decade we've had a bill lasting longer than 18 months. Funding for transit, biking, and walking remained intact, which wasn't a given with this Congress. And the framework allows cities and states to make a lot of progress on walkability, safe biking, and effective transit — if elected officials and policy makers set out to achieve those goals. Be assured that with your help we will continue to push for better transportation choices throughout Idaho.

The 5-year timeframe provides certainty for planning and a clearer picture of available resources. It also means federal agencies can administer projects and performance measures, rather than spending time writing rules and measurements. Here's some highlights below of the issues we talked about most.

A little bit GOOD a little bit BAD:

Safer streets for all users

One requirement that we pushed was included, that state DOT's like ITD and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) consider all users of the roadways when designing and building projects with a complete streets policy. In another win for locals, there is a provision in the bill allowing local governments to use the street design manuals of their preference (like our favorite the [NACTO guide](#)) and preempt their state DOT's design manual for locally constructed projects.

Funding for biking and walking preserved, but capped

The small but popular Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) that helps build safe routes for walking or biking wasn't eliminated as threatened, but it's one of the few programs where funding doesn't grow— it's capped at \$850 million. A new provision allows large metro areas to “flex” away half of this program, so some metro decision-makers could choose to ignore the demand for and the economic potential of safer routes and other community mobility projects.

Funding for metropolitan regions

Metro regions will get a (slight) increase. Though far short of what we had been pushing for, local governments in regions with populations over 200,000 will receive slightly more money to invest in their priority projects, with an increase in what's known as sub-allocated funds by 1 percent per year of the bill, up from 50% now to 55% in 2020. But our efforts to bring more funding to small towns and regions failed. The bill does nothing to allow communities under 200,000 in population to direct how funds are spent in their areas — the state retains that authority. We'll continue our work in rural Idaho to ensure that the state understands their needs and requests.

Transit

Transit may be the biggest winner in the bill. In a Congress where it was predicted transit would lose funding instead funding was increased by: 9% Urban (5307) and 10% Older Adult and Person with Disabilities (5310). The biggest win was an 89% increase in the bus and bus facilities capital program. That doesn't completely replace what was lost in the last transportation bill but it comes close. In addition, transit-oriented development (TOD) projects will be eligible for low-interest federal financing programs and a TOD planning grant program was preserved to help communities make the best use of land around transit lines and stops. Also the allocation of discretionary money (mostly for bus replacement) was made more equitable.

Passenger Rail 👍 👎

The bill takes a big step by placing passenger rail into the highway/transit bill for the first time ever. Rail is still dependent on an annual appropriation but positioned well for the long-term hope of bringing passenger rail into the guaranteed funds from the transportation trust fund in the years ahead.

Freight Mobility 👍 👎

Freight moves across the country on every mode of travel and our freight issues are inherently multimodal. The bill creates a freight discretionary grant program for the first time with \$800 million this year, rising to \$1 billion in 2020, and a new formula program with \$1.15 billion in the first year rising to \$1.5 billion in 2020, but 90% of these funds must be used on highways – ports, railroads, intelligent transportation systems, or better demand management are only eligible for 10%. It requires states and metro areas to analyze their freight movement and come up with a multimodal plan to improve things (good!) but then only gives them funding to build highway solutions (bad!). This is a backdoor way to provide more funding to states' DOTs for highway projects, and does little to promote cost-effective solutions to freight mobility

What about innovation

Demographic and technological changes are upending the transportation industry but the bill does very little to advance innovation. With the exception of a \$60 million advanced technology deployment fund, the bill is remarkably silent on how and where technological innovation can help improve mobility and accessibility. Even smaller changes such as making car-sharing eligible for federal funds failed to get included in the bill.

Using unsustainable funding to pay for yesterday's policies 👎

While the certainty of a five-year bill that guarantees funding for planning and investments is appreciated, almost a **third** of the bill's cost, \$70 billion, will be paid up front by general tax revenue — not transportation user fees — offset by accounting maneuvers and budget gimmicks. Particularly troubling is that the bill raids the Federal Reserve's capital surplus account for a portion of the funding. Only a handful of elected leaders were willing to even broach the topic of raising or indexing the gas tax to cover the cost of their desired spending. We will all be paying the tab for Congress' refusal to have a responsible discussion about revenue.

As far as the bill's policy goes, it uses tomorrow's dollars to pay for yesterday's ideas and represents a missed opportunity to do something much better. We believe the Congressional failure to take serious action on transportation funding and policy at the national level makes it even more imperative that good transportation decisions, including funding, be made at the local level. With your help Idaho Smart Growth will continue our work on that front with local Idaho Communities.

For more information read these synopsis; [T4America](#), [Community Transportation Association of America](#), and [The Hill](#).