



GREEN NEW DEAL + TRANSIT

Federal transportation policy in the US has largely failed to produce useful transit. While the lion's share of federal transportation resources go toward highways and road expansion, transit projects are forced to scrape and claw for every dollar they receive. Federal grants that do fund transit miss the mark far too often, resulting in low-ridership rail and streetcar lines.

Across the country, this model has proven a disaster for social equity and the climate. Outside a handful of large urban centers, America has a patchwork of mostly low frequency transit systems dwarfed by carbon-spewing highways that encourage sprawl and all but force people into car ownership.

The existential threat of climate change demands a different approach - one that puts fast, reliable transit service within walking distance of as many homes and jobs as possible. Only by shifting travel from cars to transit can we decarbonize the transportation sector rapidly enough to fend off a rise in global temperatures greater than 1.5C.

Enter the Green New Deal, a sweeping set of goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The GND resolution rightly places public transportation within the context of the climate emergency, and invites advocates to think broadly about how changes to federal transportation policy might achieve better transit outcomes. In response, TransitCenter has developed four recommendations that would overhaul the prevailing regime of wasteful road-widening and poor transit investment choices. In a climate crisis, we can't afford to do otherwise.

1

Overhaul federal policy to deliver better transit service, not just more transit infrastructure.

The more service transit agencies provide, the more people will ride transit. But federal transit policy is oriented around building transit infrastructure, not providing service. Shifting this funding dynamic could set in motion a virtuous circle of additional service, better maintenance, and higher ridership.

- **Provide matching funds for bus service.** The federal government should help agencies run more buses and trains. The funding should supplement, not replace, local operating support for transit.
- **Incentivize frequent service.** A transit agency that meets a benchmark of providing all-day service arriving at least every 10 minutes on its core network, for instance, could be rewarded with the release of additional federal capital dollars.

2

Stop expanding highways.

For generations, the federal surface transportation program has funneled money to states for roads - upwards of \$40 billion annually in 2018. This formula has incentivized more people to drive while starving transit and walking projects of funding.

- **Shift funding priorities.** Much of the federal highway program money should be redirected to cities and regional agencies, with an emphasis on transportation projects that explicitly reduce vehicle mileage, such as transit-priority lanes and bike and pedestrian infrastructure.
- **Get more out of what we have.** Tight restrictions should be placed on highway funds that remain with state DOTs. The focus should be on wringing more capacity out of the highway system with efficiency measures like tolling existing lanes or converting them to bus- or HOV-only lanes.

3

Let local agencies improve transit without jumping through hoops.

Today, highway departments get federal funding with few strings attached, while transit agencies have to hack through red tape. This is backwards. Transportation agencies should have more leeway to spend federal funds on basic transit needs.

- **Make walking easier.** Agencies shouldn't have to compete for sidewalk funds from an alphabet soup of tight-fisted federal programs. If cities and municipalities demonstrate need for such improvements, they should be granted funding.
- **Exempt transit-priority projects from environmental review.** Since better transit is inherently good for the environment, basic transit upgrades such as bus-priority lanes shouldn't get dragged through the expensive, time-consuming review process.

4

Build transit where people will ride it, not where it's cheapest.

The "cost-effectiveness" of a project plays an outsized role in FTA funding decisions. As a result, rail projects are often sited where it's easy to acquire right-of-way - such as freeway medians - rather than in walkable places where people are likely to ride. Transit expansion projects are also more likely to receive federal grants when local funding is already attached.

- **Federal funds should go to projects that will maximize ridership, not minimize expense.** The FTA should refrain from using cost-effectiveness formulas that favor rail alignments where it's cheapest to build, rather than in walkable, dense environments.
- **Fund projects based on merits, rather than the size of local match.** The FTA's "New Starts" program should give more weight to a project's utility and less to whether it will be accompanied by local funding.