

Transportation

Mobility for both people and goods is one of a modern economy's most important needs. The COVID-19 pandemic changed our transportation patterns considerably and put significant stress on existing transportation networks. Passenger transit usage crashed, putting those systems under financial strain. Commuting patterns changed, raising questions about whether there would ever be a return to “normal.” Consumer demand increased, leading to unprecedented pressure on supply chains in peacetime—since compounded by war in Europe.

Congress should:

- ◆ Remove barriers to easier transportation of goods by raising the weight limit for interstate trucking to at least 91,000 lb., starting with an opt-in multistate pilot program.
- ◆ Help ensure that the long-term upkeep of highways is proportionate with their use by shifting all transportation revenue and expenditure programs toward funding mechanisms, such as mileage-based user fees, that reflect the user-pays–user-benefits principle.
- ◆ Oppose reflexive bailouts or handouts to transit agencies.
- ◆ Reexamine assumptions regarding passenger transport that may need to be changed.

Interstate Trucking

Current federal limits for interstate truck gross vehicle weight (GVW) are set at 80,000 lb. with a maximum of five axles. However, all 50 states allow higher GVW trucks to transport goods within their borders, mostly via state or local roads. The lower interstate limit increases:

- ◆ The number of trucks needed to carry goods
- ◆ Demand for drivers in a tight labor market
- ◆ Emissions
- ◆ Traffic congestion

All of these factors lower the trucking industry's competitiveness against freight rail. Many current trucks are capable of hauling higher weights but instead run only partly full for part of the routes, a fact that underscores the inefficiency of the current weight limits.

To alleviate this, Congress should authorize an opt-in pilot program for states to test the effects of increasing the federal GVW to at least 91,000 lb. on six axles. The pilot program would enable the federal government and the states to assess the safety implications of higher GVW, although a 10-year pilot program in Idaho found no evidence of decreased safety. Moreover, several European countries allow 44-metric ton (97,000 lb.) trucks with no appreciable safety concerns. In fact, the European Union, which is well known for a precautionary approach, is considering increasing its current 40-metric ton weight limit to 44 metric tons across the continent.

The pilot program would immediately reduce strain on the supply chain, lessen the need for more truck drivers, and reduce congestion. According to the Rocky Mountain Institute, which places a considerable premium on emissions reduction, it will also significantly reduce carbon emissions. As such, it represents a "no regrets" emissions policy—one that reduces emissions but is worth doing even if emissions do not present a threat.

As for infrastructure concerns, studies have found that the addition of a sixth axle reduces wear and tear on road surfaces by 37 percent. The current federal bridge standard is already compliant with a 91,000 lb. weight limit.

The opt-in pilot program should accommodate as many states that show willingness to participate in order to maximize the collection of useful data.

Highway Funding

The starting point for sound transportation policy should be adherence to the user-pays–user-benefits principle. Transportation infrastructure and operations should be paid for by the users who directly benefit from them. Despite some spillover effects, the vast majority of benefits accrue to the transportation network’s users.

Compared with general revenue funding of government-owned infrastructure and services, user-pays offers the following advantages:

- ◆ **Transparency.** Unlike tax dollars that wind through convoluted bureaucracies, charges “follow” users.
- ◆ **Fairness.** Users pay and benefit directly from improvements generated from their payments; users who use the systems more pay more.
- ◆ **Signaling of investment.** Operating revenues generally track use, and popular systems can be identified for targeted improvements.

Unfortunately, many federal transportation programs do not adhere to the user-pays principle. In those cases, the programs should be reformed to meet the user-pays principle through methods such as tolling. If that proves not to be possible, it suggests that the program has high costs and low value and should be eliminated.

This principle is particularly important as Congress considers what to do about the federal gas tax and the Federal Highway Trust Fund for which it provides revenue. As more and more drivers turn to electric vehicles, the gas tax will be paid disproportionately by owners of older vehicles who are likely to be less affluent. In order to ensure that the Trust Fund has a consistent source of revenue and to ensure fairness for all road users, a replacement will need to be found.

Mileage-based user fees (MBUFs) are in many ways a direct replacement for the gas tax, reflecting the same user-pays–user-benefits principles. Congress should expand existing pilot programs to better assess the feasibility of this mechanism and to address drivers’ privacy concerns. Congress should be wary of attempts to impose

MBUFs *in addition to* the gas tax. The fees are unlikely to be seen as acceptable if they simply increase the cost of travel.

Transit

During the COVID-19 pandemic, transit ridership fell across the board. It is still unclear whether transit will ever regain its pre-pandemic ridership levels. That will likely lead to calls for bailouts from financially struggling transit agencies. Congress should oppose reflexively granting those requests. The pandemic appears to have permanently changed patterns in travel for work. According to the 2017 National Household Travel Survey, transit accounted for a tiny percentage of personal travel trips even before the pandemic. The latest survey of transportation trends, the 2021 Commuting in America Survey from the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, suggests that the proportion of workers with flexible work arrangements has now increased to 42 percent. This includes the pre-pandemic proportion of workers with the ability to telecommute (14 percent) and workers who normally work from home (12 percent.) Both of these populations have grown considerably, with a substantial number of those increases likely to be permanent. This suggests that the already weak case for public funding of transit has likely worsened considerably.

Nor is there likely to be any case for investment to attract the remaining workers onto transit. As mobility policy expert Steven Polzin of the University of South Florida has shown, the “field of dreams” case for transit—“If you build it, they will come”—has repeatedly failed to materialize. Transit supply has increased much more steadily and consistently than transit demand since the 1980s. In other words, there is already enough transit available to meet even a strong resurgence in demand. If anything, Washington and state and local governments could trim transit agencies’ budgets to meet actual demand rather than spend more taxpayer money on new projects that are unlikely to see much use.

That is not to say that all transit is wasteful. Certain areas require a functioning mass transit system. For instance, 40 percent of all transit trips nationwide take place in the New York City metropolitan area. However, Congress should require any request for extra funds for transit to be backed by a rigorous and audited cost-benefit analysis, backed up by critical hearings at which agency heads’ claims can be properly scrutinized.

Expert: Iain Murray

For Further Reading

- Iain Murray, “All Levels of Government Need a Top-to-Bottom Review of Transportation Policy,” *Open Market*, Competitive Enterprise Institute, September 2, 2020, <https://cei.org/blog/all-levels-of-government-need-a-top-to-bottom-review-of-transportation-policy/>.
- Steven Polzin, “Public Transportation Ridership: Three Steps Forward, Two Steps Back?” Planetizen, April 12, 2016, <https://www.planetizen.com/node/85595/public-transportation-ridership-three-steps-forward-two-steps-back>.