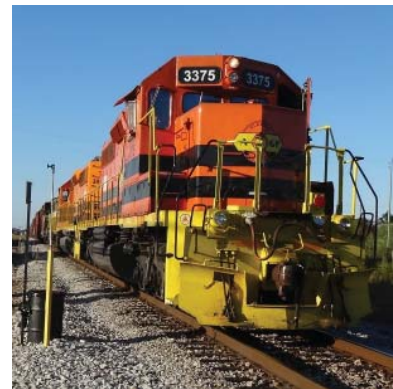


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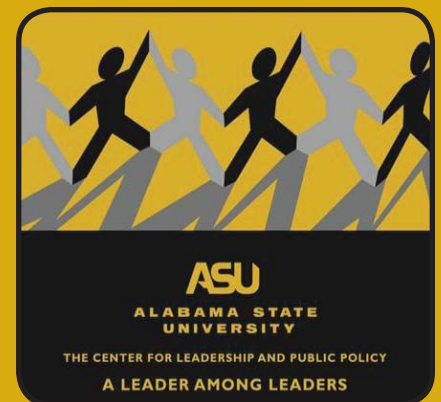
ALABAMA'S SUCCESSES AND NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS IN TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE



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FOREWORD

The authors of this study consult an extensive literature to present a comprehensive analysis of Alabama transportation policy. Citing national as well as state sources, they provide an in depth narrative of the nature of transportation decisions in the state and how these decisions affect a wide range of groups and individuals. Not surprisingly, the authors document that interests representing highway and bridge construction dominate this policy arena. They conclude their analysis by advocating for a “balanced” approach to transportation policy where the needs of those who must rely on public transportation be given consideration along with the traditional emphasis on funding the state’s roads and bridges. Importantly, the authors also document the lack of access to transportation in the state’s rural areas which isolates large numbers of Alabamians from needed city services and access to jobs that could improve the quality of their lives.

The lead author, Jon A. Broadway, earned a Ph.D. from Purdue University in radiological physics and environmental engineering and has undergraduate and master’s degrees in mechanical engineering from Auburn University. He is a founding member of the Montgomery Transportation Coalition and an original member of the Transportation Equity Network, a coalition of transportation advocacy organizations. He is a member of the Community Transportation Association of America. He was chairman of the Citizens’ Advisory Committee to the Montgomery Metropolitan Planning Organization from 2002 to 2008.

Co-author Stephen Stetson was born and raised in Troy, Alabama and graduated from the University of Texas with an undergraduate degree in journalism (media studies). He is a graduate of the University of Alabama School of Law and a member of the Alabama State Bar. He joined Arise Citizens’ Policy Project (ACPP) as a policy analyst in 2008. In addition to transportation policy, his areas of expertise include capital punishment, constitutional reform, immigration and reform of payday and auto title lending.

Previous studies in this series are: *Three Legs of the Stool: Trends and Consequences of Alabama’s Aging Policy*; *A Slow Journey for Local Government Reform in Alabama: City Managers and City Administrators*; *The Property Tax in Alabama: Its Historical Development and Current Impact*; *An Assessment of the Ecosystem for Social Entrepreneurship in Alabama’s Black Belt*; *Home Rule in Alabama and the South*; *The Burden of Chronic Disease in Alabama: Epidemiology, Economics and Policy*; and *The Growth Machine: Economic Development in Alabama*. If anyone would like a copy of one or more of these studies, please do not hesitate to contact me.

We hope that this report and others in this series will bring about needed visibility and dialogue for these public policy issues. If you have any questions or comments about this report as well as any other program or activity of the Center for Leadership and Public Policy, please do not hesitate to contact me at 334.229.6015 or tvocino@alasu.edu.

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CONNECTING OUR CITIZENS FOR PROSPERITY: ALABAMA'S SUCCESSES AND NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS IN TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transportation funding in Alabama is at a critical stage. Many stakeholders and policymakers involved in transportation planning – including professional planners, the Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT), road and bridge builders, citizens' groups, and suppliers of transportation services and equipment – now realize that the traditional methods of funding transportation infrastructure are becoming increasingly unsustainable each year. Revenues are shrinking as prices (and demands on the system) are increasing.

The problem has many causes, including: (1) sharp increases in vehicles' fuel efficiency, resulting in reduced fuel tax revenue, (2) a growing transition away from gasoline to alternative fuels, including electricity, (3) rising costs of infrastructure construction projects and (4) lack of political will to raise gasoline taxes or seek alternative long-term revenue sources for transportation infrastructure.

Further, demographic and economic changes are restructuring the nature of Alabama's transportation system. In the next two decades, the number of U.S. drivers over age 70 will triple, posing the challenge of balancing safety concerns with those of personal liberty. A system designed for single-passenger automobiles isolates many elderly and disabled citizens, as well as other people unable to afford the ever-increasing costs of automobile ownership and maintenance.

This report considers changes to our state's transportation system, building on some notable strengths and successes and guided by considerations of what Alabama needs to do to yield maximum economic return. At the same time, this report envisions an Alabama where all citizens have a chance to make a positive contribution.

Transportation infrastructure is widely recognized as an essential determinant of a community's economic development. Recent decades have seen a revolution in online interconnectivity, yet Alabama's physical infrastructure has failed to keep pace with the new benefits of connectivity provided by virtual and digital spheres.

Transportation infrastructure is both the skeleton upon which an economy is built and the bloodstream through which resources flow to serve all parts of the region. This report examines what we know and do not know about Alabama's transportation system, keeping in mind the goal of developing a comprehensive transportation system as a primary driver for economic development. In this sense, our vision of a comprehensive system involves job creation in building and operating such a system, coupled with the development of more attractive communities providing quality environments in which residents can "age in place." Such communities are those that people around the world seek out for working, raising families and retiring within a life-enriching environment.

Alabama has some notable success stories of transportation investments yielding tangible benefits for its citizens. These accomplishments are even more impressive considering that Alabama is one of five states providing no state funding to complement federal and local public transportation programs. However, Alabama also has some glaring weaknesses that can greatly benefit from an improved approach to planning and funding, guided by a persistent stakeholder community.

Weaknesses:

- **Inability to quantify Alabama's unmet transportation needs.** This deficiency prevents development of a cost-benefit analysis for investments in transportation options. Existing sources of data about public transportation in Alabama are difficult to acquire and frequently inadequate and inaccurate.
- **Lack of political will to incorporate public transportation into transportation planning tools.** Alabama's transportation planners have failed to incorporate public transportation into analysis of the state's needs. Though funding exists for planning, data have not been collected to assess public transportation deficiencies fully.
- **Failure to see the shared goals of road-building interests and supporters of other modes of transportation.** Many stakeholders have difficulty seeing the long-term economic benefits that would flow from a more balanced approach to transportation planning. A consequence is that the stakeholders too often are divided into "road and bridge folks" pitted against promoters of alternative transportation methods like buses, light rail and bicycles. Division rather than unity means we all lose in the long run, and Alabama falls further behind.
- **Inability to see beyond the single-occupancy-vehicle mindset.** Alabamians generally have placed a stigma on using and funding mass transit and public transportation. Alabama's car culture has created unhealthy dependence in a state noted for independence. Alabama leads the nation in the percentage of residents relying on automobiles to access employment, and the state's per capita road crash fatality rate is well above the national average. The overwhelming dependence on automobiles makes the state unattractive to many who have experienced well-operated public transportation elsewhere.

- **Funding restrictions.** The Alabama Constitution prohibits use of gasoline tax revenues for anything other than road and bridge projects. In an era when new revenue sources are extremely controversial, removing constitutional earmarks on gasoline tax revenue would increase flexibility for budget writers. However, with the pool of gas tax money shrinking, many road and bridge builders are reluctant to allow money to be redirected from a decreasing funding stream.
- **Rural isolation.** Alabama struggles to help people in rural areas get into cities for needed services. This isolation often depresses economic development and discourages living in small towns. High fuel costs add to the cost of living in areas that are, without access to automobiles, fundamentally cut off from the rest of Alabama. County boundaries can add additional layers of complication, political squabbling and bureaucracy.
- **Urban fragmentation.** Alabama's largest city, Birmingham, is a perfect example of the struggles experienced by Alabama's urban areas. Nearly 30,000 households in the Birmingham metropolitan area lack access to an automobile. Urban access to automobiles can be difficult to measure, because people without cars frequently move to neighborhoods served by transit. However, relying on bus service is a challenge in many cities. Fares are steadily increasing. Buses are often late, and many lack adequate heating and cooling. Many bus stops also lack shelter from the elements. Cities often struggle to find enough money in tight budgets to provide reliable bus service on routes serving high-density areas. Overlapping city boundaries and political turf battles further complicate provision of service.

Short-term recommendations:

- Alabama's transportation stakeholders should seek greater transparency of funding distribution across agencies and programs. Before the public can develop passion for change, people must understand where and how their tax dollars are being spent.
- Solutions to the problems facing urban bus systems are relatively simple. Policymakers should make substantial investments in larger fleets, create streamlined and user-friendly transit maps, and install more benches and shelter at bus stops. Planners in congested cities like Birmingham also should consider devoting portions of heavily trafficked roads to dedicated bus lanes.
- Alabama should be more transparent in public transportation data collection and incorporate more of those data into planning. Existing data collection emphasizes an inventory of machinery, rather than assessing the usefulness of existing transportation systems. This stands in sharp contrast with Alabama's extensive evaluation of road congestion and areas seeking additional road and bridge construction. We should

refocus our planning efforts to include consideration of the economic development effects of public transportation systems.

- The federal government requires transportation projects to consider the needs of bicyclists and pedestrians. Alabama should enforce and verify these requirements during the design and planning phase of projects. Too much of our state's infrastructural planning discounts these options early in the design process.

Longer-term recommendations:

- Transportation stakeholders should identify and build on Alabama's transportation success stories as models for how to proceed in the future. Such modeling should include consideration (especially at the regional planning level) of the effects of Alabama's accelerating demographic shifts and the increasing economic pressure on transportation funding sources. Though public education and stakeholder buy-in are needed across the state, Alabamians cannot wait for a single comprehensive and statewide solution.
- Alabama would benefit from the creation of a third-party nonprofit consumer watchdog to help citizens draw meaningful conclusions from data about public transportation services. Riders and voters need to be better educated about the policies that determine access to (and quality of) public transportation options.
- Future transportation spending plans in Alabama should account for a likely cultural shift – driven by changing demographics, economic factors and service needs – toward broader public support for non-automobile transportation options. It is critical for advocates to build the political will needed to ensure funding streams for construction of public transportation infrastructure are viable. Public transportation systems cost money. There are costs to build infrastructure, costs to maintain and repair it, and costs to employ people to do those things. Alabamians serious about public transportation must create a climate in which the public sees these investments as valuable ones that they are willing to make.

INTRODUCTION

Writing about coordinated public transportation systems in Alabama is somewhat like writing about unicorns: There are not any, and they are unlikely to appear any time soon. A more accurate analogy, though, suggests that coordinated public transportation systems in Alabama are less like mythical creatures and more like extinct ones, such as the dodo or passenger pigeon. That is because Alabama's history includes significant leadership in both private and public transportation, as well as some systems that were notable nationwide. The city of Montgomery, for example, had the nation's very first citywide electric trolley system.

Yet even a cursory look at Alabama's current transportation system makes it hard to imagine a time when our state was ever on the cutting edge of public transportation. Alabama is No. 1 in the use of single-occupancy vehicles for getting to work. State policy often is dominated by a "roads and bridges" perspective that caters to asphalt infrastructure and a narrow focus on highway engineering.

A few cities maintain bus systems, though virtually all are plagued by inadequate service and paltry ridership. Fares on most of the state's 13 urban transit systems have increased steadily, even as routes have been eliminated. Ten of the systems offer at least some sort of fixed-route service. Other than passenger fares collected at the farebox, all are funded entirely by local and federal money, with the state making no monetary investment.

The arguments in favor of balanced transportation options in Alabama are well-documented and numerous. Among

those arguments, in no particular order, are that public transportation:

- Improves access to health care,
- Improves access to jobs,
- Improves access to legal services, grocery stores and vital consumer needs,
- Improves access to family and friends,
- Benefits Alabamians with disabilities,
- Benefits elderly Alabamians,
- Benefits low-income Alabamians,
- Benefits the environment,
- Creates jobs in building, staffing and maintaining transportation infrastructure,
- Reduces pedestrian fatalities,
- Reduces traffic congestion and
- Reduces dependency on foreign oil.

Most states deem public transportation to be worthy of some measure of state spending. Alabama is one of only five states that does not. This budgetary choice has major economic consequences and significant fallout for Alabamians who struggle with access to automobiles. While some families choose not to own a vehicle, most zero-vehicle households in Alabama simply cannot afford one. In the Birmingham-Hoover metropolitan area alone, nearly 30,000 households lack access to a vehicle.

This paper is intended to be a resource for everyone looking for a new way forward on transportation. It will provide historical context for Alabama's transportation system before offering an overview of the current environment and examining several problems with our current perspective. Most importantly,

this report will suggest ways to move forward to meet the undeniable funding and resource challenges of coming decades. The report will highlight the benefits of shifting Alabama's transportation policy away from near-total dependence on single-occupancy vehicles and toward a more seamless mix of multi-modal transportation.

Transportation policy can be complex, confusing and even exceedingly dull to the average observer. Cultivating a

passion to seek transportation options can be difficult, especially in Alabama, where funding is scarce and suspicion of government spending is abundant. The status quo of automobile dependency remains tempting to those who have not felt the frustrations of being stranded. This report attempts to clarify the problems and the reasons for them, then point toward some solutions. Clarifying the policy landscape is the first step toward seeking a better policy pathway.

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

History of Public Transportation in Alabama

Numerous works have examined the various social, cultural, industrial and economic forces that led to the popularization of the automobile in the United States and the corresponding urban sprawl made possible by the internal combustion engine. These publications have thoroughly documented the ways in which transportation policies and norms evolved, profoundly transforming the residential, commercial and industrial geographies of our nation.¹

However, the history of public transportation in Alabama provides interesting and crucial background for understanding the current national state of affairs. From the late 19th through the mid-20th centuries, Alabama transformed from a leading center of viable urban public transportation to a state nearly totally dependent on single-occupancy vehicles. Alabama is not unique among states in that regard, though it remains exceptional in the degree to which it transformed from a leading-edge innovator in public transportation into a stubborn recalcitrant. Alabama today is near the bottom of national rankings measuring non-automobile transit, and is one of only five states providing zero state dollars to public transportation, according to data compiled by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO). Arizona, Hawaii, Nevada and Utah are the others.²

In some ways, Alabama is not atypical. Many parts of the nation are characterized by a primarily rural population with local economies heavily dependent on agriculture. In such places, an absence of

viable public transportation systems is common. This is especially true in low-wealth states lacking the tax base and public support for funding such systems. Alabama's vast rural areas thus were predictably disconnected prior to the explosion of a network of paved roads, the proliferation of automobiles, and home construction booms in previously inaccessible areas. Nonetheless, Alabama's urban centers were once among the best in the nation at promoting mobility among citizens and visitors.

For example, Montgomery established the nation's first electric trolley system, the Capital City Railway, in 1886.³ A compilation of Alabama history, 1921's *History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography*, touts Montgomery's role in public transportation with considerable pride:

"It is proper to note that in Montgomery the first electric trolley car ever known in the world's history was operated. The story of the discovery of electricity as a motive power and its practical application as a means of rapid transit is a thrilling one. To Charles Vanderpoel, a Belgian chemist, working in an improvised shop in Detroit, Mich., is due the distinction of the discovery. The initial trip of the car was made on the morning of April 7, 1885, in the City of Montgomery, the whole work being done by Mr. Vanderpoel, under the direction of J. A. Gaboury, then the chief owner of the Montgomery street car lines."⁴

By 1908, Montgomery's streetcar system managed 42 miles of electrified rails within the city and had nearly 80 streetcars.

The city's population was nearly 40,000.⁵ Those rails were torn up entirely when the trolley system was replaced by a privately operated bus system in 1936. The City of Montgomery purchased the bus system in 1974.⁶

In Birmingham, Alabama's largest city, horse-drawn railcars shuttled workers to bustling mills and mines. From 1900 through 1910, Birmingham's population increased eight times more quickly than did the state's population as a whole. City railcars serving the needs of the booming "Magic City" later evolved into steam-powered vehicles and, by the 1890s, into state-of-the-art electric streetcars.⁷ These also eventually gave way to motorized buses, but the commitment to public transit remained high.⁸ Birmingham's transportation system experienced peak ridership in 1948, providing 93 million rides to residents and visitors.⁹

Birmingham's transportation system has struggled mightily in recent years, however.¹⁰ The system has had multiple brand identities, experienced high leadership turnover (with 25 different directors in 25 years and nine since 1994) and battled to maintain basic funding and service levels.¹¹ Now organized as the Birmingham-Jefferson County Transit Authority, the system has been branding itself as MAX since 1985. Ann Dawson-August has been the executive director since January 2013.¹²

Other areas of Alabama also have created small transit systems over the years, using municipal and federal funds. The state has 13 urban transportation systems and nearly 30 rural systems operating demand-response services, known as "dial-a-ride." Urban systems – many of the traditional "fixed route" variety – exist in Anniston, Auburn/Opelika, Autauga County, Birmingham, Decatur,

Dothan, Gadsden, Huntsville, Mobile, Montgomery, Muscle Shoals and Tuscaloosa. The major public transportation systems provide about 7 million rides each year, according to the most recent estimates available.¹³

But most Alabamians still use automobiles and roads to get from place to place, and road-building has long been seen as a driver of economic development. Prior to 1911, road construction and maintenance was primarily the responsibility of county governments or private individuals. But that year, the Legislature created the State Highway Commission, with Governor Emmet O'Neal appointing Robert Spragins to serve as the first chairman.¹⁴ The commission was replaced by the State Highway Department in 1931, and the Legislature finally created the Alabama Highway Department in 1939, laying the foundation for what today is known as the Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT).¹⁵

Alabama's Farm to Market Act of 1943 set the goal of paving 100 miles of road in every county in 10 years. This goal was reached in 1955, when Alabama finished paving a total of 6,801 miles of Farm to Market roads and building 114,388 linear feet of bridges across Alabama. The program continued until 1970.¹⁶ The building and maintenance of roads and bridges became an important political tool in Alabama – a way of showing results to loyal constituents. The value of road building and paving as a political currency cannot be overstated. For nearly a century in Alabama, those making decisions about locations of asphalt and gravel have been able to cultivate statewide and local political power. The companies building the roads and bridges also forged a well-organized and well-respected lobbying group.

Alabama's 67 county governments today maintain more than 59,000 miles of road and 8,600 bridges.¹⁷ These totals exclude the hundreds of miles of federal Interstate highways that web across Alabama. Governor Jim Folsom signed Act 93-843 in 1993, changing ALDOT from a "Highway Department" to a "Transportation Department," reflecting a national trend to define transportation as more than just highways.¹⁸ However, ALDOT has consistently struggled to evolve beyond its original vision as a department of roads and bridges.

When conversation turns to buses in Alabama, many people around the world immediately think of the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955. While the courage, organizational skills and discipline of Alabama civil rights activists have gripped the hearts and minds of people around the world for nearly 60 years, the boycott's legacy for public transportation in Montgomery and the rest of the state is twofold. On the one hand, the boycott hit the municipal bus lines financially, galvanized activists across the nation and resulted in extraordinary legal change: mandatory racial integration of public transportation. On the other hand, within months of the boycott's commencement, the City of Montgomery raised fares by 50 percent and eliminated service to predominantly black areas of the city.¹⁹

By the boycott's 40th anniversary, bus service had been cut by 70 percent, and fares had doubled.²⁰ In the 1980s, there were 36 fixed routes serving the city. By the turn of the century, there were only three.²¹ By 1998, Montgomery became the nation's first metropolitan area to fully abandon fixed-route buses and switch to a demand-response system using minivan-sized buses that could seat 16 passengers.²² The shift to Demand and

Response Transit (DART), requiring riders to make reservations for transportation service, did nothing to slow the steady decline in service quality and ridership.²³ The city since has resumed some fixed-route service, replacing DART with the current incarnation of the Montgomery Area Transit System (MATS), which maintains roughly 15 fixed local routes.

Since the heyday of buses and trolleys, public transportation in Alabama, as in the rest of the nation, has been a hotly contested flashpoint of racial polarization, stigma and class conflict. As many white residents have spent decades abandoning urban cores for suburbs, they also largely have left public transportation behind as the neglected domain of racial minorities and low-income riders.²⁴ Systems have further suffered from an emerging anti-tax sentiment that has gripped the public in many states, combining with a sluggish economy to starve government coffers. As a result, most contemporary city bus systems in Alabama are underfunded, slow, inconvenient, uncomfortable and confusing.²⁵

History of Relevant Federal Transportation Policy

Just as it would be short-sighted to divorce the steady erosion of Alabama's public transportation infrastructure from technological developments related to the spread of the automobile, it also would be a mistake to evaluate Alabama's transportation policy apart from federal policy developments driving national sentiments about public transportation and shifts toward single-occupancy vehicles and geographic sprawl. More than a century ago, a U.S. senator from Alabama played a crucial role in developing the American system of roads. Senator John H.

Bankhead of Jasper, Alabama, was the chairman of the Senate Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads, and in the 20th century's early decades, Bankhead helped appropriate hundreds of thousands of dollars in road construction and improvement funding.²⁶ His time in the Senate overlaps with an explosion of road building in the United States, and the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916 that bears Bankhead's name (the Bankhead-Shackleford Act) is one of his legacy's most enduring elements.

The United States has 4 million miles of roads, more than the entire European Union. Of this system, a great many of the most traveled roads are part of a federal Cold War-era system known as Interstate highways. Alabama has five major Interstates, and the state receives about \$735 million in federal transportation funding each year.²⁷ Particularly because Alabama does not supplement federal public transportation money with state appropriations, federal transportation policy plays a huge role in determining how (and whether) Alabamians get from place to place.

In 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed the National Interregional Highway Committee, which produced a recommendation for a "National System of Interstate and Defense Highways."²⁸ The result was the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944. Once primarily a state function, the federal role in building roads grew substantially when national security concerns drove the creation of the Interstate program in the 1950s.

President Dwight Eisenhower pushed for the passage of the Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956, which appropriated \$25 billion (nearly \$200 billion in contemporary dollars) to build 41,000 miles of multi-lane, limited access

highways.²⁹ The act was successful due partly to concerns about national mobility in an age when the prospect of nuclear war loomed large in the public consciousness. But the law's true legacy may be the Highway Revenue Act of 1956, which established a Highway Trust Fund (HTF) into which revenues from motor fuel taxes were deposited. For the first time in American history, gas tax money was tied to specific road building and transportation projects.

Road building was booming, but mass transit still had a major role to play in American civic, cultural and economic spheres. Modern federal public transportation efforts can be traced to the administration of President John F. Kennedy and the passage of the Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1964. The original mass transportation grant programs were administered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Private transportation providers were struggling economically, creating a role for government funding to step in and fill service gaps.

Additional federal support was required. Congress established the Department of Transportation (DOT), and President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the act creating it on Oct. 15, 1966.³⁰ From its first day of operation in April 1967, the federal DOT became a leading voice on American transportation. The federal government set the tone for many of the nation's transportation policies while attempting to give states flexibility in implementing projects tailored to specific local needs.

The DOT was tasked with administering federal transportation money, which is appropriated by Congress in enormous multi-year funding bills. The next section of this paper will analyze the landscape of contemporary federal transportation policy.

CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE

Federal Funding: Highway Money and Gas Taxes

“We’ve concluded that most of the money we have needs to be spent to preserve the existing [roadway] system. Under the current fiscal conditions, we really have to constrain our new [construction] projects. That’s just a reality.” – John Cooper, Director, Alabama Department of Transportation³¹

Federal transportation money is allocated in periodic multi-year highway bills, along with the various temporary patches needed to extend those pieces of legislation after they expire. When it comes to mass transit, these federal dollars (and local money provided by a handful of cities) comprise the only spending on public transportation that happens in Alabama. This is due to the state’s constitutional prohibition against spending gasoline tax revenue on anything other than roads and bridges. This means all state spending on transportation is poured into construction and upkeep of roads and bridges. As such, it is particularly important in Alabama to keep track of federal revenue streams and program appropriations.

To understand public transportation policy at the national level, the most important parts of the federal Department of Transportation (DOT) to follow are the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). These two agencies are subsets of the Cabinet-level department and govern much of public transportation policy in the United States.

Originating in the Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1964 (UMTA), the

FTA primarily administers non-highway transportation funding streams and makes two kinds of grants. Formula grant programs are awarded to states based on population. Discretionary grant programs are competitively awarded based on applicants meeting certain requirements and are based on selected criteria specific to each grant.³²

The other main piece of the DOT governing public transportation is the FHWA. The agency’s stated missions are to “improve mobility on our nation’s highways” and “improve highway system performance — particularly its safety, reliability, effectiveness, and sustainability.”³³ Both the FTA and the FHWA shape federal public transportation policies. These entities interact with state departments of transportation to set priorities and provide funding for a variety of projects.

Federal transportation policy is not only determined by the executive branch. In fact, all branches of the federal government operate in the framework of a multi-decade-long effort to build a comprehensive federal transportation plan. These efforts began in 1991, with congressional passage of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA). That law was replaced and updated in 1997 by the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), which was itself supplanted by 2005’s awkwardly titled Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU). Together, these laws are commonly described as the TEA acts, and the most recent of the trio, SAFETEA-LU, was itself replaced in July 2012 by Moving

Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21).³⁴

If you are already bewildered, take heart. This jumble of acronyms may seem confusing, but it is significant for understanding transportation funding because the Highway Trust Fund is special among federal spending programs. Rather than passing annually through the U.S. Treasury's general fund in traditional budgetary appropriations, transportation revenue is segregated into a distinct funding pool allocated by spending authorization laws like the TEA acts and MAP-21. These laws typically control funding for four to six years, giving a wider planning horizon for long-term infrastructure construction projects. It would be hard to plan long-term building projects if funds were subject to the fiscal uncertainties of year-to-year political battles.

The TEA acts and MAP-21 are enormous pieces of federal legislation, affecting countless construction projects and reflecting various policy priorities, ranging from efficiency to infrastructure safety. The sums of money involved are also large: MAP-21 authorized \$105 billion for FY 2013-14, with FTA receiving \$10.6 billion in spending for FY 2013 and \$10.7 billion for FY 2014.³⁵

As the first long-term highway authorization since 2005, considerable attention has been paid to MAP-21 and how it apportioned \$21.3 billion in transportation spending over two years. For Alabama, not a lot changed. Alabama's share of federal money under MAP-21 remains relatively stable, about \$735 million per year.³⁶ However, because MAP-21 was only a two-year bill, political negotiations are continuing to determine the content of MAP-21's successor and funding for FY 2015 and beyond.

Because MAP-21 faced expiration in September 2014 and "still has not addressed the core issue of creating a dedicated and reliable source of transportation funding," it remains to be seen how well federal policy will adapt to reflect the changing transportation needs of the United States.³⁷ In July 2014, MAP-21 was temporarily extended with a patchwork proposal until a more comprehensive solution can be reached before May 2015.³⁸

When talking about federal revenue streams, it is useful to keep in mind how those streams are, in turn, redistributed to states. People fueling up at gas stations in Alabama put gasoline tax money into the federal HTF, but the FTA returns some of that money to Alabama through a variety of funding streams.

Transit experts often refer to these funding streams by the numeric provisions of the legislation creating them. For example, grants available to large urban areas for public transportation often are called "5307 funds" because they are authorized by Section 5307 of the statute. Unfortunately, this means that in addition to the acronyms, advocates also must become familiar with a set of numbers attached to federal funding streams.

Along with the \$5 billion in 2014 appropriation of "5307 funds" for larger cities (areas with a population of 50,000 or more), MAP-21 also appropriated \$608 million in spending for rural areas, grants known as "5311 funds." Grants made under Section 5310 are devoted to enhancing the mobility of seniors and people with disabilities and are allocated to states based on how many people in the targeted populations live in those states.

As with many government programs involving federal spending, Alabama gets back more money than it puts in. Transportation appropriations to Alabama in

the TEA acts and now MAP-21 consistently have exceeded the amount that Alabamians pay into the Highway Trust Fund in gas taxes. In fact, Alabama historically has excelled at capturing generous amounts of federal transportation funding, surpassing the take of neighboring Southern states. Alabama received a \$1.25 return in FY 2012 and an overall return of \$1.16 from 1956 to 2012, for each gas tax dollar sent to the federal government. Each state is guaranteed that at least 92 percent of its federal gas tax spending will be returned to the state.³⁹

Why the HTF Is Collapsing: The Case of the Dwindling Gas Tax

Whether a resident or just passing through, each time you pump a gallon of gasoline into your vehicle in Alabama, 18.4 cents goes to Washington, D.C., to be added to the Highway Trust Fund (HTF). Alabama keeps an additional 18 cents per gallon, dedicated to state roadway needs.

The HTF has its origin in the Eisenhower Interstate Highway Act of 1956, which provided both the vision for planning and the funding base for building and maintaining Interstate highways. Since its establishment, the federal gasoline tax feeding the HTF has increased only three times: to 9 cents in 1982, to 14.1 cents in 1990, and three years later up to 18.4 cents per gallon, where it remains today.⁴⁰ The Alabama portion of the gasoline tax has not increased since 1992.⁴¹

Federal gasoline taxes provide a dwindling source of HTF support, leading the National Conference of State Legislatures to conclude that “transportation policy and funding are at a critical juncture in the United States.”⁴² The reasons for this revenue crisis are manifold. First, gas tax revenue is based on a fixed unit of measure

(the gallon) and is not tied to inflation. Though the dollar may purchase less and less over the years, the gallon always will remain the same size. Further, the average vehicle fuel economy has been increasing steadily for decades, leading to fewer trips to the gas station. This gas mileage trend is the product of both consumer demand and federal regulations requiring higher miles-per-gallon capabilities for new automobiles. For example, new federal fuel standards are likely to decrease federal gas tax revenue by 40 percent by 2040.⁴³ For the same reasons, the widespread emergence of hybrid and electric vehicles, while a desirable partial solution to oil dependency and pollution, further threatens the HTF’s ability to provide sufficient support for transportation infrastructure.

In addition, basic resources essential to transportation infrastructure construction – steel and concrete – are becoming considerably more costly as the United States competes globally with emerging countries experiencing building booms. China is now purchasing some 40 percent of the world’s steel and consuming half of global concrete supplies, driving up costs.⁴⁴

In Alabama, where lawmakers have not raised the state portion of the gasoline tax in more than two decades, the revenue stream has lost 20 percent of its original value and would require a 10 percent tax hike even to return revenues to the 1993 level.⁴⁵ ALDOT has been aware of this problem for years, though legislative solutions have been in short supply.⁴⁶

Simply to compensate for inflation since it was last increased in 1993, the present federal gasoline tax of 18.4 cents per gallon would have to be increased to 28 cents per gallon.⁴⁷ The National Surface Policy and Revenue Study Commission estimated that the federal portion of the gasoline tax would need to increase by another \$1 per gallon

to meet the infrastructure needs for coming decades.⁴⁸

How large are those needs? The AASHTO Center for Excellence in Project Finance analyzed major studies to estimate the magnitude of future funding requirements.⁴⁹ The three studies analyzed were the 2006 federal DOT Conditions and Performance Report, the report of the National Surface Transportation Infrastructure Financing Commission and the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission. Each study estimated funding levels needed either merely to maintain existing infrastructure or to improve infrastructure in anticipation of future needs. The results were sobering. Assuming that existing infrastructure is merely maintained until 2035, only 39 percent to 57 percent of needed money will be available. If recommended improvements are to be achieved, available revenue will provide only 29 percent to 40 percent of the needed funds.⁵⁰

Meanwhile, the HTF continues its deficit spending. At the present rate of spending, the HTF will be depleted within a year or two, so additional funding sources are required if major cuts are to be avoided. Adding to the problem, a recent Congressional Budget Office (CBO) report projected the shortfall amount would grow by another \$6 billion per year between 2012 and 2022, amounting to an additional shortfall of \$57 billion over this period. This additional shortfall is the result of improved vehicle fuel efficiency over that time.⁵¹ For another example of the magnitude of the HTF shortfall, consider that the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) spent \$48 billion on transportation projects, yet would have failed to fill even a single year's shortfall in HTF revenue.⁵²

As gas prices increase, people are simply driving less. The HTF crisis will accelerate as the total vehicle miles traveled (VMT) continues to decline. The per capita miles traveled in the United States have steadily declined over the past nine years, a trend linked to higher gas prices and younger people seeking alternatives to driving, as well as "changing demographics, saturated highways, and a rising preference for compact, mixed-use neighborhoods, which reduce the need for driving."⁵³ Young people are especially interested in alternatives to spending time in single-passenger vehicles. The average VMT nationwide has dropped 23 percent since 2001 for people ages 16 to 34.⁵⁴

An American Automobile Association spokesperson pointed to the nation's recent dismal economic climate as a contributing cause: "With the number of Americans unemployed or underemployed, you have a reduction in disposable income, fewer commutes, fewer shopping and leisure trips. And we are on pace to set a record for the cost of the average annual price of gasoline."⁵⁵ However, many of the cultural and technological shifts leading younger people to drive less are permanent and will remain even when the economy rebounds.⁵⁶

With regard to skyrocketing gas prices, well-designed cities with functioning public transportation systems have proved more adaptable to spikes in fuel costs.⁵⁷ A group called CEOs for Cities recently estimated that by merely reducing VMT by 1 mile per person per day in the nation's top 51 metro areas, the United States could realize a \$29 billion "Green Dividend."⁵⁸

Experts point to other factors also leading to a nationwide decrease in VMT, including:

- The 78 million baby boomers are driving less and taking fewer trips as most of them are no longer raising children.
- More people are using public transportation following a brief falloff in 2008.
- Teenagers are driving less. In 2008, 31 percent of 16-year-olds had a driver's license, compared with 46 percent in 1983. More states have started phased-in driving licenses for young drivers, keeping younger people off the road until a later date.⁵⁹

Though there are good reasons to support a nationwide VMT decrease, the trend's implications for HTF funding are dire. Plummeting HTF revenue imperils the fund's ability to satisfy transportation needs. Alabama's dependence on single-passenger vehicles and automobile traffic makes the state particularly susceptible to these financial consequences. Alabama last raised its state gas tax in 1992, a five-cent hike long since dwarfed by inflation. And the federal gas tax, last raised in 1993, has lost 33 percent of its purchasing power since that time.⁶⁰ As of July 2014, Alabamians pay 39.27 cents in tax per gallon of gas, well below the national average.⁶¹ Alabama's future transportation needs cannot be met with a shrinking pool of money. The quest for alternatives is urgent.

Failing to address the HTF's deficit would threaten to slow or stop thousands of transportation projects around the country. A temporary fix produced in the summer of 2014 did nothing to resolve the larger structural problem.⁶² The funding was created by a temporary \$10.8 billion

measure known as "pension smoothing," allowing companies to defer payments to employee pension funds, thereby briefly increasing taxable profits.⁶³ Stopgap solutions will lock policymakers into a cycle of annual crises, threatening nearly 30 percent of federal transportation funding passed on to states.⁶⁴ The CBO projects that the fund will risk a similar shortfall every year for the next decade.⁶⁵

Possible Solutions

"The only way we're going to fix this is if everyone puts their ideas on the table and has an honest discussion on how to find common ground." – Anthony Foxx, United States Secretary of Transportation, April 29, 2014⁶⁶

The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) in 2011 attempted to confront the dwindling revenues provided by the gas tax.⁶⁷ Among AASHTO's recommendations were:

- Incorporating inflation costs into investment levels,
- Imposing distance-based user fees for vehicle miles traveled,
- Ensuring that climate change legislation provides new revenue streams for transportation, and
- Eliminating or reducing earmarking in federal transportation funding.

The AASHTO report explored a wide array of possible revenue streams to satisfy the HTF shortfall. Despite the promise held by innovative solutions to the problem, the report ultimately concluded that the traditional HTF funding sources, including gasoline taxes, "hold the greatest potential for addressing the current discrepancy in

receipts and outlays in the HTF.”⁶⁸ Though the political will to pursue any of these options may be lacking, nearly all options listed (at the rates assumed) would be needed before 2016 to eliminate the HTF’s near-term funding crisis.

The National Council of State Legislatures (NCSL) also analyzed three possible solutions to the funding crisis: indexing the gas tax, taxing alternative fuels and imposing a tax on vehicle miles traveled (VMT). Anti-poverty organizations like the Arise Citizens’ Policy Project have historically been wary of sales tax increases due to their regressive nature and disproportionate impact on low-income consumers. However, charging for use of the highway system (whether in the form of gasoline taxes or VMT fees) remains the most likely method for funding needed infrastructural construction and maintenance projects.

Many professional transportation organizations and advocacy groups believe user fees and/or toll roads may be the most viable future revenue sources.⁶⁹ MAP-21 expanded states’ ability to use toll roads, but the measure’s effectiveness has yet to be seen, as the law allows toll roads only where traffic capacity also is expanded. Such a critical limitation, coupled with the overall unpopularity of toll roads, likely will not effectively serve to address funding shortfalls.

Without a solution to the HTF shortfall, road and bridge construction projects (along with the associated jobs) will be at risk.⁷⁰ Policymakers are on the clock to devise a sustainable and viable alternative to the current funding mechanisms.

Alphabet Soup: MPOs, RPOs and More

MPOs

Federal law creates transportation planning areas for the nation’s metropolitan regions and requires the establishment of entities called Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs). These entities are tasked with cooperatively developing goals for transportation improvements. The 1962 Federal Aid Highway Act forbids using federal funds for new transportation projects in large urban areas (populations above 50,000) unless such projects were based on a “comprehensive, coordinated, and continuing” planning process between state government and local communities.⁷¹ The Federal Highway Act of 1973 required an MPO to be established in any urban setting with a population above 50,000.⁷² Nationally, these associations are united under the umbrella of the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations.⁷³

Alabama has 12 urban areas with populations meeting such a threshold, along with a corresponding number of MPOs. Most are embedded within other regional planning groups or councils of government. An exception to that pattern is Montgomery, where the city historically has housed the MPO functions for the three-county urban area around Montgomery. Areas of Alabama not included within an MPO receive their planning assistance from either a regional planning organization (RPO) or ALDOT.

One of the main functions of each MPO is to prepare and update a Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) with a 25-year planning horizon. The LRTP is produced every five years, with the intent of including demographic and social changes affecting the needs for transportation services. The LRTP is rather general in nature and typically does not include specific project recommendations.

Who comprises MPOs? State governors are empowered to determine each MPO’s

composition and structure. As an example of a typical MPO's composition, Montgomery's 12-member organization consists of elected representatives from the Town of Coosada, the City of Millbrook, the City of Montgomery, the City of Prattville, and the City of Wetumpka, as well as county commission representatives for Autauga, Elmore, and Montgomery Counties. These representatives are organized into an MPO Policy Board, a Technical Coordinating Committee (TCC) and a Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) supported by MPO staff who perform the planning duties, including development and approval of the LRTP.⁷⁴ The Policy Board membership includes local elected officials, an ALDOT engineer and the city's director of planning. Additional non-voting members include representatives from the Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration, the Montgomery Area Transit System, the Central Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission and the Autauga County Rural Transportation System.⁷⁵

The TCC is a particularly important part of the MPO. It provides the technical guidance for the planning process. It consists of planners, project engineers, transit managers and other professionals from the MPO planning area. Montgomery's TCC also includes representatives from federal, state and local agencies, including the Central Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission, Montgomery Area Transit System and Autauga County Rural Transportation System. The Montgomery Regional Airport director is a non-voting member of the area's TCC.⁷⁶

MPOs also maintain an important list known as the four-year Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).⁷⁷ Projects must be enumerated in the TIP before

funding can be secured from federal, state or local sponsors. Inclusion of any project in the TIP asserts that the project is "financially constrained" – i.e., federal and local funding sources have been identified and either are available now or will be in the near future. The purpose of financial constraint is to avoid having MPOs request expensive projects that have little chance of receiving the money to complete. However, MPOs frequently break a large project into smaller pieces to allow inclusion into the TIP.

Most project types in the TIP receive 80 percent of their funding from federal money, with a 20 percent match from state or local money. However, some Interstate highway projects require only 10 percent state or local funding, and a few special programs are funded fully by the federal government (as was the case with many ARRA programs). Fully federally funded programs typically address urgent needs to spur economic growth in designated employment sectors that are experiencing economic stress.

RPOs and RPCs

Areas of the state that are too small to fit within an MPO are typically supported by a rural planning organization (RPO). RPOs are conduits through which federal funds flow into rural areas. Both MPO and RPO functions are typically housed within – and supported by planning staff from – one of Alabama's 12 regional planning commissions (RPCs), often referred to as a regional council of governments. Both MPOs and RPOs provide input to the updates of the Statewide Transportation Plans (SWTPs), which are updated every five years and have at least a 20-year planning horizon.

Five regional councils in Alabama provide staff for RPOs for 18 Alabama counties. All 12 regional councils are members of a loose-knit association called the Alabama Association of Regional Councils (AARC). Regional councils are tasked with highly varied roles in transit planning, but they have no fiduciary responsibilities or authority for disbursing funds.⁷⁸ These organizations are often influential, but are usually invisible to the transportation activists and stakeholders seeking to impact the important decisions about the structure and funding of transportation systems in Alabama.

RDOs

Regional development organizations (RDOs) are a national network of multi-jurisdictional planning and development groups that provide administrative, professional and technical assistance to more than 2,000 counties and 15,000 municipalities across the nation. These public entities also may be known as councils of government, area development districts, economic development districts, planning and development districts, planning and development commissions, regional development commissions or regional councils.⁷⁹

RDOs' role in transportation planning has changed over time. Historically, planning and prioritization of rural transportation projects was the sole responsibility of state departments of transportation. The passage of federal transportation laws in 1991 and 1997 set the stage for enhancing the participation of rural local officials in statewide transportation planning. Unlike MPOs, whose responsibilities and funding have been set in federal law since the 1960s, there is no formal federal definition of (or

specific funding stream for) RDOs. However, states are increasingly turning to regional planning groups to assist with outreach to local officials and the public in rural areas and to compile data for a document called a Human Services Coordinated Transportation Plan (HSCTP).

The National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) Research Foundation surveyed RDOs around the nation in 2011 to determine their level of involvement in rural transportation planning. Of the 217 RDOs in 42 states responding, 83 percent (181 organizations representing 30 states) are authorized to engage in rural transportation planning responsibilities, making them similar in nature to a RPO. NADO also found that 52 percent of RPOs conduct public transportation planning, and 55 percent complete coordinated human services transportation planning as part of their work, with most considering transit as part of their regional decision-making process.⁸⁰

Following the Funding Trail(s)

Each county in Alabama received \$339,000 in federal highway money in 2010. These funds come from the federal government but are processed by ALDOT.⁸¹ These funds are dispersed to counties and specific projects, often with matching federal and local funds to make construction or repair projects possible. However, following the funding streams, especially when it comes to public transportation spending, can be incredibly challenging.

In 1977, the federal General Accounting Office, now called the Government Accountability Office (GAO), published a report identifying 114 separate federal programs as being involved in some sort of

funding for transportation services, most in an uncoordinated and disjointed fashion.⁸² The report pointed to the need for improved cost disclosure and accounting transparency for transportation-related expenditures. In short, most federal programs could not track federal funding as it moved down to the local level. As a result, transportation spending at the local level had become a complex game in which narrow local-agency goals were preserved in a vacuum of information about alternatives and an absence of cost-benefit analysis of the chosen expenditures. Services were often duplicative, while major gaps in service remained in other areas.

Unfortunately, this situation has continued during the nearly 40 years since the GAO's report. President George W. Bush specifically cited the GAO's conclusion when he issued an executive order in 2004 establishing an Interagency Transportation Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility (CCAM) within DOT.⁸³ This initiative, seeking to coordinate federally funded transportation sources, became widely known as United We Ride. It sought to focus particularly on improving the availability, quality and efficient delivery of transportation services for seniors, people with disabilities and low-income people. In Alabama, Governor Bob Riley signed an executive order in April 2005 to implement and advance the United We Ride program.⁸⁴ A few noteworthy efforts resulted from joint federal-state United We Ride efforts, but efforts varied widely from state to state. The CCAM strategic plan suggests great ambitions for expanding human services infrastructure but includes no specific performance measurements and offers few concrete policy follow-ups.⁸⁵

Confusion about the status of United We Ride in Alabama is representative of an overall lack of clarity about transportation

spending, how it translates into policy and how the funding helps people get to their destinations. As another example, the Transportation Research Board (TRB) in 2011 issued a detailed and highly critical report indicating that public transportation accounting deficiencies remain, resulting in funding cuts to the various programs.⁸⁶ The TRB report echoed the 1977 GAO report in pointing out jurisdictional confusion, bureaucratic overlap and overall inefficiency. Due to inconsistent reporting practices, some transportation programs allocate their full cost to providing transportation, while others allocate only a partial cost. Some programs do not allocate any of the cost of transportation-related activities and instead charge the activities to administrative or management functions.⁸⁷ These inconsistencies make it virtually impossible to get a true picture of the cost, effectiveness and monetary benefits of the tax dollars spent on transportation services. As a result, Alabamians get a clouded picture, at best, of the benefits of transportation investments.

This state of affairs has tremendous implications for Alabama's 28 rural transit providers receiving federal Section 5311 funds. ALDOT passes these funds to transit providers after keeping 15 percent of the funds for administrative overhead, typically amounting to approximately \$10 million annually. Tracking the funding need not be so difficult. According to the TRB report:

"[I]mprovements in data recording and reporting could be made by nearly all recipients of federal funds used to provide human services transportation. DOT-funded agencies could record and report more information on passengers

while other agencies could record and report more information on service outputs and services consumed. The good news is that nearly all of the currently available para-transit software programs collect all these data, so community transportation systems that use software for scheduling, dispatching, and billing purposes will have readily available, automated data that could be

converted to the more standardized formats recommended by this project. These data then would be ready to generate the information needed for management and reporting purposes. Additional data collection procedures will be required for fixed-route transit systems where few data on the numbers and types of persons traveling are available.”⁸⁸

WEAKNESSES IN ALABAMA

Limited Data

“If you don’t measure results, you can’t tell success from failure. If you can’t see success, you can’t reward it. If you can’t see failure, you can’t correct it.” – David Osborne and Ted Gaebler⁸⁹

It is difficult to quantify unmet transportation needs in Alabama precisely due to lack of data. Limited “snapshot” surveys are all that presently exist. Those surveys suggest a very large unmet transportation need in Alabama.

This report’s authors conducted a careful review of available literature, including state long range transportation plans and similar documents produced at the regional transportation planning level. The authors also conducted discussions with transportation researchers at major Alabama research centers and met with regional transportation planning officials. These investigations revealed that Alabama has never conducted a statewide assessment of its inhabitants’ level of connectivity, nor has Alabama assessed the negative economic and societal impacts of a lack of connectivity.

Alabama is certainly not alone in this situation; many areas are slow to measure economic losses in a fashion that will facilitate wiser investments. But to estimate the state’s unmet transportation needs and the resulting economic impact of disconnectedness, the authors were forced to use the “best available” studies, which were admittedly piecemeal and limited in scope.

Perhaps the best-designed study to date is a graduate school thesis written more than a decade ago. The study, conducted by Adam Sandlin, covered only two

counties in north Alabama – Lauderdale and Colbert – but is notable for its design and intent to measure unmet transportation needs in Alabama.⁹⁰ The counties, just below the Tennessee border and split by the Tennessee River, have a single urban area containing four Alabama communities: Florence, Muscle Shoals, Sheffield and Tuscumbia. At the time of Sandlin’s study, the two-county region was served by nine buses operating a demand-response system, popularly known as a “dial-a-ride.” Such a system provides service from a central dispatcher, with potential passengers calling in to request service.

Sandlin’s analysis showed that the unmet need in the two-county service area was 93.9 percent, meaning that only 6 percent of the estimated need for transportation service was being met.⁹¹ Sandlin did not continue his analysis, however, to estimate the negative economic impact of being able to serve only 6 percent of the need within this two-county area.

In Alabama, nonprofits and churches deal daily with citizens unable to contribute fully to the state’s economic vitality. The most often mentioned sectors of the population with unmet transportation needs are people seeking job training, access to health care or access to maternal needs such as prenatal or child care. Elderly Alabamians and those with disabilities also are likely to have trouble getting to destinations affordably and conveniently. Unfortunately, the state does not quantify how many people are affected.

Alabama’s Department of Mental Health in 2008-09 surveyed individuals with disabilities receiving government services from the department. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents said they had to rely on

others for their transportation needs, and more than half reported that they either “never” or only “sometimes” have access to transportation when they want or need it.⁹²

Recognizing the inability to quantify the economic impact of missed investments, Russell Jackson, former chief operating officer of the Alabama Association of Nonprofits, said:

“Unfortunately, due to lack of a comprehensive statewide needs assessment for transportation, state transportation planners are unable to take a proactive view and approach to fully understanding the transportation gaps in our state and the populations being impacted. Adequately funding public transportation in our state might appear to be a costly endeavor, however, by supporting a comprehensive transportation study the findings, I believe, might just surprise our state leaders when they see the savings experienced by various state departments, hospitals, corporations and other groups when their clients have accessible, reliable and affordable transportation options. The savings might actually exceed the investment.”⁹³

Other existing resources attempting to quantify unmet needs are not compiled annually. For example, researchers from the University Transportation Center for Alabama conducted a survey of transportation providers in 2000. The report concluded that the cost of service improvements being sought by those providers at that time was \$34 million in the first year and \$27 million annually thereafter.⁹⁴ This analysis was extended

the next year in another report focused on rural Alabama’s transportation needs. Though the follow-up report encouraged provision of transportation service for the 17 Alabama counties without it (and improvements in the other 50 counties), the report appears to be a one-time intervention into the discussion surrounding statewide transportation policy in Alabama.⁹⁵

ALDOT produces an annual report targeting legislators, releasing the 100th edition in 2011.⁹⁶ Unfortunately, the bulk of these annual reports merely describe the agency’s structure rather than unmet transportation needs in Alabama. Statistical tables are often microscopic and blurry and are provided with little explanatory context to make them useful for stakeholders interested in transportation policy. Public transportation is barely mentioned.

The largest efforts to quantify unmet transportation needs in Alabama are documented in the periodically-updated coordinated public transit plans produced by each of the 12 ALDOT regions. These plans are produced as a condition of receiving federal funding under transportation appropriation legislation. Federal law requires that these plans,

“must be based on input from public, private, and non-profit transportation providers; human services providers; and the general public. Required elements include (1) an assessment of available services, (2) an assessment of transportation needs, (3) strategies, activities, and/or projects to address gaps, needs, and efficiency improvements, and (4) priorities for implementation based on resources, time, and feasibility of implementation. Minimizing

duplication of services in order to maximize collective transit coverage is a prime imperative.”⁹⁷

Most of them can be located on the ALDOT website.⁹⁸ The West Alabama plan, jointly produced by the Tuscaloosa MPO and the West Alabama RPO, may provide a useful example for illustrating the nature of these plans and the extent to which they attempt to determine gaps in transit access.

Rather than evaluating transit services provided by agencies within the region, the 2011 coordinated public transit plan for West Alabama addressed deficiencies across the area.⁹⁹ It examined seven counties and then the West Alabama region as a whole.

Constitutional Hurdles

In 1952, Alabama voters amended the state constitution to set aside all state gasoline tax revenue for road and bridge construction. Amendment 93, passed during the heyday of the American love affair with the automobile, was pushed by road and bridge builders to prevent legislators from siphoning off transportation funds for other projects. As such, Alabama’s constitution forbids use of gas tax revenue on public transportation projects. This is one of the most identifiable reasons why Alabama remains one of the few states in the nation to appropriate no state funding for mass transit.

For decades, state public transportation advocates have sought to repeal Amendment 93, seeking to free the hands of future budget writers and allow the possibility of appropriating state gas tax dollars to public transportation projects. However, politically powerful road builders, well aware of the shrinking pool of gasoline tax revenue, thus far have successfully

protected their constitutional claim on gas tax revenues.

Rural Access: Health and Youth

“Alabama continues to have a serious rural health care access issue related to the absence of transportation and this issue is directly related to the low-income levels in those [rural] areas. The Alabama Department of Public Health is concerned about this dilemma...” – Dr. Donald E. Williamson, State Health Officer¹⁰⁰

Alabama’s state health officer, Dr. Donald Williamson, is one of the most consistent and tireless voices for better transportation connectivity in Alabama, especially as this unmet need affects rural counties. He has expressed clear awareness of the depth of Alabama’s problem and deep concern for the hundreds of thousands of Alabamians whose unaddressed health conditions affect not only themselves but their families, their neighbors and their present or potential employers. Lack of access to health care and disease prevention information places moral and economic burdens on our state. The United Health Foundation’s annual report ranked Alabama 47th in the nation in the overall healthiness of its population for 2013.¹⁰¹ This ranking was two spots lower than in 2012.

Alabama is consistently among the very worst in the nation for the incidence of diabetes and obesity. Both conditions can be mitigated with proper health education, dietary changes and regular physical exercise, but many of Alabama’s rural communities are isolated from access to healthy food. West Alabama in particular has some of the nation’s highest percentages of people living in “food deserts,” or areas lacking access to healthy

food. For example, nearly 15 percent of Sumter County's residents live farther than a mile away from a grocery store and do not have a vehicle. In Greene County, almost 14 percent of the population lives in those conditions. In Hale County, around 11 percent of residents lack access to healthy food. In Perry County (which has only two grocery stores), almost 16 percent of the population lack transportation and live far from fresh food.¹⁰² Many urban residents in Alabama also find themselves living in food deserts because of economic factors and lack of public transportation options.¹⁰³ The U.S. Department of Agriculture has produced an online interactive food desert locator.¹⁰⁴

Other public transportation policies also impact public health issues, such as construction of bike lanes or pedestrian walkways to encourage exercise and healthy behavior.¹⁰⁵ Disease prevention and promotion of healthy lifestyles are much cheaper in the long run than dealing with the morbidity (and tax expenditures) associated with sickness and obesity. The proliferation of preventable diseases is a key driver of the state's skyrocketing health care costs. Failure to address this reality represents the sort of short-term thinking already too prevalent in too many policy decisions.

Alabama received an "F" on the annual March of Dimes Premature Birth Report Card in 2013,¹⁰⁶ a dismal ranking it has maintained for several years.¹⁰⁷ This ranking, based on compiled health and mortality data, places Alabama well below the U.S. average grade of "C." Approximately 15 percent of Alabama births are premature, as measured by childbirth before 37 weeks of gestation. This figure, though shockingly high, is actually an improvement from the 18.2 percent observed in 2006.

Many, if not all, of the lifestyle issues and behavioral risk factors would be reduced by better access to pre-conception, prenatal and post-natal treatments for medically eligible women. Lower-income women in rural areas typically have limited access to quality medical care and trained professionals to provide guidance from before pregnancy through the postpartum phase. A major study of barriers to access to medical care revealed the vast distances required for many uninsured pregnant women to travel to receive pre-natal care.¹⁰⁸

Wider availability of transportation could reduce the number of premature births and their costs to the public. And obesity, which could be substantially reduced by bike riding and pedestrian activity, is estimated to account for 21 percent of all U.S. health care costs.¹⁰⁹ These weaknesses are additional hidden (or "external") costs because such after-the-fact budgetary expenses typically are not recognized as being connected to the social costs of a transportation system that fails to provide connectivity to health care consumers.

These problems are compounded and magnified in the lives of rural Alabamians with mental health concerns. People with serious mental illness in the United States die 25 years earlier than the rest of the population.¹¹⁰ Life expectancy for people with serious mental illness actually has gotten shorter over the last decade. Fortunately, roughly two-thirds of those conditions are generally preventable through a combination of dietary control, individualized medication and physical activity.¹¹¹ But a side effect of the deinstitutionalization of people with mental illness, a trend well underway in Alabama, is that it disperses patients across the state. This situation places many of them at the mercy of an inadequate transportation

system and the state's "barebones" Medicaid program to address their health care needs.

The 17 Alabama counties with the highest percentage of households with no vehicles available are all rural counties. Low personal income in rural counties exacerbates the effect of isolation and lack of access to automobiles or other forms of transportation.

Of Alabama's 44 lowest-income counties, 43 were rural, according to 2009 data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis. Two of the state's poorest counties, Bullock and Barbour, are adjacent and wholly without any public transportation system or service. They are among the 12 rural counties without any rural public transportation system. Even Montgomery County, home to the second-largest urban center in the state, has no public transportation outside the city of Montgomery.

Though many rural Alabama counties are nominally served by public transportation (frequently from a system housed and dispatched from several counties away), these populations remain woefully underserved. A study of Lauderdale and Colbert counties found a nearly 94 percent unmet need for transportation.¹¹² The United Way of Central Alabama conducted a six-county survey wherein unmet needs were found to range from 31 percent to 39 percent of the customer base, depending on the desired destination.¹¹³ For example, Wilcox County is served by a very limited public transportation "dial-a-ride" or demand-response system, but about 17 percent of all households have no access to a vehicle. Wilcox County typically ranks at or near the bottom of most indicators of economic development and community health measures and has the 65th lowest per

capita personal income of any county in the United States.

Lack of transportation is also a major barrier to K-12 students' participation in cultural, environmental and outdoor experiences. Jimmy Harris, director of the Alabama Nature Center, said students from rural Alabama counties are the ones most often deprived of the opportunity to experience the enrichment offered by this excellent nature preserve in central Alabama.¹¹⁴ Harris sees this limitation as a continuing and increasing problem as school budgets become even more restricted for student enrichment activities. Urban schools typically can make the investment to hire supplementary school bus transportation to access the nature center, Harris said, but rural and lower income schools are often unable to make arrangements for transportation. Learning and achievement gaps are heightened when wealthier students have better access to transportation for enrichment opportunities like field trips and extracurricular activities.

Public transportation could reduce some of the burdens on low-income Alabamians, but it could save money for middle-class and rich citizens, too. Studies show a person can save more than \$10,000 a year by riding public transportation instead of driving.¹¹⁵

Disadvantaged Populations

Debate remains about exact definitions of "urban" and "rural," but one estimate found that nearly 1.1 million of Alabama's 4.8 million residents lived in rural areas in 2013, a total that has held relatively steady since 1980.¹¹⁶ Though some rural counties continue to hemorrhage population (and nearly all population growth is in urban areas), Alabama's slow transformation from

a rural state into an urban one is far from complete.¹¹⁷

Contemporary rural life in Alabama may no longer reflect the idealized vision of small southern towns made popular by television shows like “The Andy Griffith Show” and books like Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but people living in small towns and unincorporated areas do (and should) expect to be able to participate in the greater economic and social health of the state. All too often, without reliable access to an automobile, such participation is almost impossible.

This disconnection is a story already quite familiar to rural residents across the nation. From 2005 to 2010, 3.5 million rural residents in the United States lost access to scheduled intercity transportation, meaning modes of transportation capable of taking passengers to urban centers and between cities.¹¹⁸ Eleven percent of rural residents nationwide now lack access to intercity transportation, up from 7 percent in the middle of the past decade. In Alabama, the percentage of people without access to intercity transportation skyrocketed from 6 percent to 35 percent, due in large part to the loss of two train stations (rail travel will be discussed in the next section of this paper) and 56 bus stations.¹¹⁹ These totals ranked Alabama as the third worst state in the nation (ahead of only North Dakota and South Dakota) in terms of having rural citizens isolated from the ability to travel from city to city. Though this trend was national, nowhere was it as pronounced as it was in Alabama, with nearly 30 percent of the state’s rural population losing access to intercity transportation between 2005 and 2010. Alabama’s poorest rural counties bore the brunt of the loss of service, particularly the bus stations that were once lifelines for residents seeking access to other cities.¹²⁰

In response to decreases in traditional intercity bus service, low-cost “curbside” bus services have expanded in underserved areas. These services stand in contrast to the century-old national operation provided by Greyhound. Unlike Greyhound and smaller regional bus operations (such as Trailways), many curbside bus services do not have traditional exchange points within terminals and may embark and disembark passengers from restaurant parking lots or motels. These intercity bus transportation networks cover the largest domestic geographic area of any mode of public transportation.

However, this type of service has come under intense scrutiny because of several recent high-profile accidents involving curbside services. Questions of driver fatigue and avoidance of vehicle safety requirements may have slowed expansion of service.¹²¹ Further, private for-profit transit providers have obvious incentives to focus service on densely-packed urban areas, particularly as gas costs continue to increase. Time will tell if such innovative, low-cost services can overcome safety deficiencies to fill an intercity connectivity niche in Alabama.

These changes drastically affected rural customers’ lives through loss of mobility. In rural areas served by only one mode of transportation (automobiles), too many customers found themselves isolated and without access to essential life-saving services. Compounded by inadequate connectivity between travel modes (whereby it is difficult to get around in a city, even if a rural resident were to get a ride into an urban center), rural Alabamians found themselves without access to services needed outside their own communities.

Public transportation challenges also have implications for disaster preparedness. A study focused on disaster evacuation policy (of considerable interest to coastal Alabama residents and lawmakers) suggested that nearly 8 percent of the American population lacks vehicle access.¹²² A more recent Brookings Institution report says more than 10 million American households lack a private vehicle, including nearly 29,000 households in the Birmingham-Hoover metropolitan area that qualify as “zero-vehicle” households.¹²³

In addition to considering rural Alabamians’ needs, those seeking to shape transportation policy should consider the changing demographics of those on the road. The number of U.S. drivers over age 70 will triple in the next 20 years, presenting safety issues as roads increasingly are filled with older drivers.¹²⁴ Older drivers suffer from slower reaction times and impaired eyesight, particularly at night.¹²⁵ Public transportation options would help these residents continue to participate safely in society even after their driver’s licenses have been revoked. A broader range of transportation choices also would address the moral challenges of a transportation system that effectively traps many non-driving elderly citizens in their homes.

In Alabama, nonprofits and churches deal daily with citizens unable to contribute fully to the state’s economic vitality. These charitable institutions are interacting with sectors of the population seeking job training, access to health care (especially prenatal care) or child care. Elderly Alabamians and those with disabilities also are likely to have trouble getting to destinations affordably and conveniently. Unfortunately, the state does not quantify how many people are affected.

In the minds of too many Alabamians, public transportation is a public policy lens through which socially held views on poverty can be seen. For many people, public transportation is for “them,” the dirty and unwashed, a perspective stemming from racial and class-based hostilities.¹²⁶ Mitigating and changing these views will be key to efforts to expand public transportation access for seniors, rural residents, people with disabilities and other Alabamians in the coming decades.

Rail Service

Though the nation often romanticizes rail travel, actual opportunities to move between cities by rail are extremely limited. Only the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (popularly known as Amtrak) and the Alaska Railroad (owned by the state of Alaska) now provide intercity passenger rail service in the United States. All of Amtrak’s 500-plus stations and a majority of the Alaska Railroad lines provide coverage to rural areas. Together, though, they provide intercity rail coverage to just 40 percent of the rural population in the 47 states served by the intercity rail. (Only Hawaii, South Dakota and Wyoming lack intercity rail transportation.)¹²⁷

Passenger rail travel is a valuable and popular method of transportation in the northeastern United States. More than 2,200 trains operate over some portion of the Washington-to-Boston route each day.¹²⁸ From October 2012 through September 2013, Amtrak served nearly 31.6 million passengers, the largest annual total in the history of the quasi-governmental agency. Every day, an average of more than 86,000 passengers ride more than 300 Amtrak trains.¹²⁹

However, rail access has declined significantly in Alabama, Florida and

Mississippi in recent years due to the loss of scheduled rail transportation at multiple facilities. In Florida, intercity bus service continued to serve many of the stations previously serviced by intercity rail. However, in Alabama, access to rail remains severely limited, and it declined from 2012-13. As noted in the previous section, rather than filling the gaps left by decreased rail access, intercity bus travel in Alabama also has declined.

Amtrak runs two long-distance trains through Alabama: the Crescent (running daily from New York through Birmingham to New Orleans) and the Sunset Limited (running three times a week from Orlando through Mobile en route to Los Angeles). There are three stops in Alabama: Tuscaloosa, Birmingham and Anniston. Service to Mobile and Atmore was suspended in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.¹³⁰ Unfortunately, there is still no north-south rail route to connect Birmingham or Huntsville with Mobile.

Boosting passenger rail travel in Alabama will not be easy. A report from the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission says, "A cultural shift will need to take place across America to encourage our citizens to take transit or passenger rail when the option is given."¹³¹ Anyone even casually familiar with Alabama knows that cultural shifts are easier to recommend than to manufacture.

The federal government provided \$8 billion in ARRA funds for intercity passenger rail projects across the nation in 2009.¹³² However, congressional opposition has prevented many of America's federally funded rail projects from reaching their potential. Many conservatives long have opposed federal spending on public transportation, particularly rail.¹³³ Republican governors in Florida, Ohio and Wisconsin rejected federal funds for high-speed rail projects in their states in 2010.¹³⁴ However, some conservatives insist that rail is well worth the investment.¹³⁵

Debates may never be settled about whether the nation should embark on construction of a system of high speed rail networks.¹³⁶ Federal expenditures of \$11 billion since 2009 have thus far produced limited results at best.¹³⁷ Such systems may or may not cross Alabama's borders, connecting our state to commerce, tourism and economic growth. However, many major American cities are recognizing rail as a crucial part of downtown development and building sustainable urban density. Detroit and the Twin Cities are among the cities seeing new rail-based systems (trolleys in Detroit and light rail in Minnesota) as a critical part of their future infrastructural plans.¹³⁸ ¹³⁹ In many ways, such cities are embarking to build urban networks similar to those existing in Montgomery and Birmingham less than a century ago.

CONCLUSIONS

Road builders, transportation managers, service providers, customers and would-be customers all agree: Alabama has a shortage of all types of funding for transportation. In both the long and short terms, stakeholders and available studies concur with this funding alarm.

Alabama has structural, administrative and bureaucratic obstacles to a better transportation system. The state's noteworthy successes in roadway development and multi-modal services have occurred despite many bureaucratic obstacles. Only when a dedicated person or organization persists in overcoming institutional barriers have successful Alabama transportation programs emerged. The styles and methods used to overcome these obstacles have been highly variable, but the fact remains: persistence, based on knowledge of a specific, identified need, has been the consistent element in each successful model.

The funding problems are not insurmountable. Other funding options do exist, as AASHTO noted in its 2011 funding options report. These options include VMT fees and toll roads.¹⁴⁰ With sufficient political initiative, lawmakers could increase the gasoline tax or find alternate funding sources to build a better transportation system without having to clear the high hurdles required to revise the state constitution.

Alabamians (including legislators, advocates and stakeholders) consistently have lacked transparent access to quality information on planning and implementation for the state's transportation system. At the state and regional levels, citizens often are not afforded serious participation in oversight of the critical early stages of transportation decisions. Citizen input

typically comes so late in the design process that it has little value or impact. Data, when available, are often presented to citizens in voluminous quantities, with unclear presentation intimidating people seeking to engage in serious review. Development plans also are often woefully lacking or dismissive of realistic solutions to transportation dilemmas.

Other states may offer ideas for Alabama to pursue in fleshing out a public transportation system. The Florida Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged (CTD) may provide one such example. The CTD has been recognized several times for quality and efficiency. In addition to stable and continued strong state leadership, two other factors stand out in Florida. First, the state has mandatory pooling of all state transit funds to redistribute to counties through a network of mobility managers. Second, the Florida Legislature has created an increasing budget line item for the CTD, relying on economic studies showing hundreds of millions of dollars of savings to the state.¹⁴¹

Too many Alabamians are unaware of the economic value of multi-modal transportation investments. This is because Alabama has not evaluated the economic and quality-of-life values of transportation investments. In addition, many Alabamians do not know what a seamless multi-modal transportation system would look like because they have never seen one or lived in a place with such a system. Alabama residents are unlikely to seek budgetary changes to develop a broadly accessible public transportation system until they know more about its shape and effects.

Alabama policymakers evince a near-singular focus on industrial development and job creation. But to attract the best and the brightest from around the world to live and work in Alabama, we must understand the desires of the younger generation. Nearly 88 percent of millennials say they want to live in urban settings.¹⁴² Though Alabama's rural population is moving steadily into urban areas, the state's transportation infrastructure fails to meet the desires of a generation that supports transit investments and wants to live in pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods.

Further, demographic changes of Alabama residents are inescapable. For a growing number of Americans, the automobile is becoming fundamentally less central to their lives.¹⁴³ Young people prefer to drive less, even as previous generations are losing the skills to safely operate automobiles. One in five people over the age of 65 does not drive.¹⁴⁴

Investing in public transportation is also consistent with the current economic agenda. For every \$1 billion spent on transportation, about 13,000 jobs are created. And transit projects have particular impact, creating 31 percent more jobs per dollar spent than construction of new roads and bridges.¹⁴⁵ A recent report from the International Energy Agency suggested that reforms to urban transportation and planning policies could save \$70 trillion worldwide between the present time and the year 2050, due to global trends toward urban concentration.¹⁴⁶ Domestically, the Economic Policy Institute concluded that an ambitious package of infrastructure development (focused around transportation and utility projects) would "boost GDP by \$400 billion and overall employment by 3 million net new jobs by the end of the first year, with the increased

levels then sustained over the seven-year life of the investment."¹⁴⁷

Gas prices average more than \$3 per gallon and show no sign of substantial decline. These prices are more than three times higher than they were in the 1990s, although that decade saw the lowest gas prices since the 1940s.¹⁴⁸ Global turmoil in coming years could cause fuel prices to spike further. Increasing fuel costs likely will continue to suppress automobile travel, suggesting Alabama needs to create viable alternative modes of transportation.

Existing financial resources and structures are inadequate for Alabama's future needs. Proposed solutions and mixes of transportation options certainly differ, but the conclusion remains that business as usual for transportation in Alabama is simply not an option.

Inattention to connectivity is evident in Alabama's transportation planning efforts, particularly early in the design process. This is most clearly demonstrated by the lack of information on connectivity when compared to the vast database collected and maintained on roadway mobility and the conditions of Alabama's roadways. The Community Transportation Association of America has found the same absence of data as it has tried to compile nationwide assessments on the number of passenger trips provided across modes of travel.

This inattention to connectivity in design produces a narrowly focused system design that overly emphasizes easily measured variables such as increasing the average speed along roadways and decreasing commute times between urban and suburban areas. The current narrow vision overlooks the lost economic potential of job creation in Alabama counties that would benefit from a wider vision for transportation investments.

A narrowly constructed economic analysis skews potential investment options by omitting some costs or benefits that may not be readily apparent at first glance. Such economic externalities represent benefits and/or costs that do not appear within a typical analysis. An economic externality occurs when a resource is provided to the public at a cost less than “full recovery cost.” This results in a third party (often unknown) outside of the economic analysis bearing the economic burden of a decision. One example is the unmeasured burden on the medical system due to lack of investment in rural transportation.

An economic externality produces a stress in the economy and tends to favor use of one resource over another, without realizing that great damage is being done to the overall community or state. Within the context of transportation investments, examples include heavy investment in road building and minimal investment in mixed modal transport (including pedestrian, bike, bus transit and rail). Unfortunately, the public often hears that road usage is relatively cheap and has little cost for the individual to use. Meanwhile, complementary forms of transportation such as rail, transit, bike and pedestrian accommodation often are presented as costly, inefficient and impractical.

Alabama has yet to make an effort to evaluate the opportunity cost resulting from our state’s overwhelming investment in roads. Planning documents from ALDOT and MPOs suggest the data to make a full-range analysis of transportation options are missing. As a result, the pattern of transportation investments has yielded unmet needs across our state, as the limited available studies on unmet need make abundantly clear. Alabama has failed to evaluate the dollar-value loss to the

state’s economy as a result of these unmet needs.

Overlooking (and not measuring) connectivity – the ability to get where you want to go from any given starting point – results in transportation investments having a greater negative impact on those who cannot use automobiles. Failure to consider connectivity also discounts the effects on people for whom use of automobiles is an inappropriate choice to satisfy their transportation needs, including seniors with limited vision, physical, or cognitive driving ability; people with disabilities; and people who are too young to drive.

One example of such an oversight would be the construction of a limited-access roadway that separates a residential community from a shopping area. People in the residential area then effectively are forced to use a vehicle to travel a very short distance to the shopping area because no early attention was given to alternative modes of travel, such as bicycles, motorized scooters or pedestrian traffic. Unfortunately, Alabama, like most states, is full of such examples.¹⁴⁹

We are not entirely without optimism for the future of our state’s transportation policy. “[W]e can relieve this dependence and destruction and secure human and global well-being ... [W]e can find, create, and revive the remedies, and that planning solutions depend, in the end, on land use solutions – on mobility based on human movement and transportation beyond the private automobile. ... [W]e must and can end a late auto age in which every transportation decision is a highway-based, driving-first decision. ... [H]uman will and political action can become the engine to find ways to reduce the sway of the internal combustion engine.”¹⁵⁰

Whether you see transportation as a matter of civil rights and human dignity, or simply as an opportunity to create jobs by building and maintaining infrastructure, spending money on public transportation is a good deal for Alabama. Alabama will not

move forward at a reasonable pace until it builds a public motivated to support public transportation. Citizens armed with adequate data and an interest in public policy have the power to urge appropriate stakeholders to make the needed changes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Seek full disclosure for funding related to any transportation programs. Many of these programs may not be identified explicitly as “transportation” in agency budgets. It is important to have transparent disclosure of federal funds and how they are disbursed. Give scrutiny to the funding streams for proposed infrastructure construction projects. Review how the design choices were made and the itemized scope of work. Such disclosure and oversight may require review and records requests by consumer organizations. Individual advocates and stakeholders typically lack sufficiently detailed knowledge to pursue the appropriate budgetary questions to a conclusion.
- One strategy would be to start small, focusing on counties that really want better transportation opportunities and are willing to commit in the long term to achieving better connectivity. Strengthen successful projects, such as Bayline and BRATS in Baldwin County. Build on existing programs.
- Keep all key stakeholders at the table. Seek the active support of business and community leaders, regional stakeholders and ALDOT’s Transportation Planning and Modal Programs Bureau. Include those who are willing to “think outside the box” and risk criticism from all directions to achieve the long-range goals of better connectivity for all Alabamians.
- Do not accept “we can’t do it that way” from anyone, especially officials who create bureaucratic obstacles to innovative approaches seeking to “stretch the envelope” on what has been accepted practice. Do not accept prohibitions on mixing rural and urban transportation programs. Do not allow funding silos to prevent successful regional outcomes. Remember that the thematic purpose of much of federal transportation law is to incentivize innovation.
- Build toward a unified vision. Transportation means so many things to so many people: rail, buses, brokered vans and dial-a-ride systems. Some see trolleys for tourists in a city, while others envision high-speed rail corridors crossing the state. Jefferson County is key. Get people on the same page. Fight to close the rural-urban gap. Find common ground for legislative delegations. Though the economy is a crucial issue in nearly every election, public transportation will not become a top priority in Alabama until it becomes an issue that can decide elections.
- Acknowledge that the executive order creating Alabama’s “United we Ride “ program was severely deficient in establishing the Coordinating Committee on Access and Mobility (CCAM) and implementing the 2004 presidential executive order. A decade ago, these programs were slated to establish long-term solutions to connectivity problems in this state. We can more effectively move forward by understanding recent failures. Alabama’s executive order did not require disparate transportation

providers to establish coordinating councils through which all transportation funding would be redirected. Stakeholders should work with the governor to review and revise Alabama's executive order to bring it more in line with those of states like Florida, which have realized enormous economic benefits from a mandatory coordinated transportation program. ALDOT should be tasked with working actively and cooperatively with the United We Ride program to improve its effectiveness.

- The governor should ensure visionary leadership of ALDOT. Strong management experience in balanced transportation systems is important because the bureaucratic obstacles to change are vast. Strong ALDOT leadership should find ways to implement data tracking and other policy decisions needed to make public transportation in Alabama a reality.
- Fund buses. Fortunately, the stigma surrounding public transportation is not permanent,¹⁵¹ and in many U.S. cities, it does not exist. Many cities are proud of their public transportation systems and tout them as a way to attract visitors and investors.¹⁵² Municipal bus systems must have well-maintained fleets and properly-constructed routes. Bus stops should include shelters and benches.
- Other issues: Alabama municipalities should prioritize seeking matching local funds for federal transportation dollars. The gasoline tax should be raised and indexed for inflation. If state legislative action is sluggish, localities must lead. Stakeholders and leaders across Alabama should study alternate transportation funding streams including toll roads, "pay-as-you drive" options, and direct general fund appropriations. It would benefit legislators and transportation advocates to repeal Amendment 93 to the Alabama Constitution. The amendment constrains budgetary decision making and ensures that public transportation projects will remain impractical.

WHAT YOU CAN DO!

Citizen engagement on the complex issue of public transportation is not easy. It requires a particular degree of diligence, focus and commitment. Still, there are some simple things that you can do:

Learn about the transit organizations in your area. You may live in a city, in which case you might have an urban bus system. Or, you might live “out in the country,” in which case you might have a rural system. Your transportation dollars might be controlled by an MPO or an RPO. It is important to learn who makes the transportation decisions in your area so you can learn to influence them appropriately. If you live in a city with more than 50,000 people, your area has an MPO. Take a look at its published “long range transportation plan” for your area and consider whether it contains a balanced vision for public transportation.

Attend local transit meetings. These groups should not operate without knowledgeable citizen involvement or media attention. Determined citizen activists can shine sunlight on these meetings and force officials to remain accountable to the public’s wishes.

Join or start a transit policy group. People are more powerful when united, and information sharing is a lot easier when tasks are divided up. Several groups exist to focus on statewide policy, but your area might not have a group working on local transportation issues. In that case, you might need to start such a group.

Contact your lawmakers. If you are interested in public transportation, you will quickly see how many politicians in Alabama think narrowly about roads and bridges. Requests for improved public transportation systems often are rebuffed by saying the government simply cannot afford to invest in such infrastructure. Continue to emphasize the economic and societal value of investing in public transportation.

Make transportation an election issue. Some leaders will pay attention to public transportation concerns only when they are convinced that failure to do so might cost them votes. Transportation is rarely an issue of distinction between candidates running for office in Alabama today. But if voters start to demand answers and accountability from candidates and officeholders, electoral change will begin to force policy change.

ARGUMENTS AND RESPONSES

When talking to friends, neighbors or policymakers about public transportation, you are likely to hear a number of familiar responses. To make your advocacy more persuasive, here are a few common reactions to calls for increased investments in public transportation, along with a few useful responses:

Claim: *It's not fair. Everyone pays for it, but not everyone will get to use it.*

Reality: This is true of almost all public investments. Our taxes pay for roads we may never use, for schools our children may never attend, for police and fire protection we may never call upon. Society as a whole benefits when we pool our resources to promote the common good. It is important for everyone to have access to transportation to get them to work, medical care, shopping or wherever else they need to go. When people are connected to opportunities, we all benefit.

Claim: *There's not enough money to pay for public transportation.*

Reality: This is a challenge, but it is no excuse for inaction. Building public transportation infrastructure supports construction jobs, and running and maintaining it creates even more jobs. Good public transportation options also are very appealing to businesses deciding where to locate or expand their operations. Sometimes you have to spend money to make money.

Claim: *Public transportation systems won't pay for themselves.*

Reality: Some systems do, and many more break even. Even if a bus or train system does not fully pay for itself with revenue from riders, that argument is also true of other important public functions like schools, libraries and most roads. Things do not always have to turn a profit to have value to society.

Claim: *People won't use public transportation.*

Reality: If you build it, they will come. Sometimes a culture of transportation must be created. In other words, advocates must work to build a public for public transportation. For example, most people likely have not heard about studies suggesting a person could save up to \$10,000 a year by riding public transit instead of driving. That sort of savings could mean a big improvement in people's quality of life.

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The authors bear sole personal responsibility for any factual errors that may exist in this report. The views expressed herein are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of anyone who provided review or the sponsors of this project.

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