

# Better Planning Needed For Rural America's Transportation System

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Like most farm kids, I've experienced my fair share of windshield time. Most of my early years included traveling gravel roads on a school bus or checking out animals and crops in a pickup truck. But there was a time when our family could actually ride a train into Chicago where our cattle were once sold.

I still enjoy driving across the country because it's a great way to monitor changes in the rural landscape, both positive and negative. Often times, it's the only way to travel. Passenger trains are non-existent in many parts of rural America, as are other forms of mass transportation. Rural airports are struggling to remain open and often require multiple connections before you can reach your destination.

Most of the roads I've been on this spring could use some improvement. Tight state and federal budgets are making it tougher to maintain roads and protect public safety. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration<sup>4</sup>, rural areas accounted for 56 percent of fatal road crashes and 57 percent of fatalities nationwide. Part of the problem is that people tend to drive faster in the "wide open spaces" and accident response times to receive medical treatment can be lengthy. Another part of the problem is that major interstates across the nation's heartland are often packed, bumper-to-bumper, with cars and large semi-trucks trying to move during peak drive times.

## Transportation bill

The upcoming reauthorization of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act (SAFETEA-LU) provides an opportunity to modernize, strengthen, and integrate the transportation system that connects rural people and places to each other and to the wider world, and to improve transportation, economic development and quality of life outcomes for rural America, notes the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) in a recent study.

"Transportation investments are critical to the future of America's small towns and cities, and the rural regions surrounding them. With public resources growing ever scarcer, federal policy must now give these regions the same latitude to set their own priorities, and build collaborative and innovative approaches to achieve them, that our nation's metropolitan regions have long benefited from," commented RUPRI President and CEO Charles W. Fluharty.

The report shows that a variety of transportation investments – including transit, vanpools, walking and biking paths and roads and highways – are critical to the economic development and well-being of our nation's smaller communities and rural areas. Local leaders will need to step up to the plate so that their regional interests are represented in a Congress focused on dramatically reducing the federal deficit.

This RUPRI study draws from an in-depth literature review and offers policy recommendations as Congress considers reauthorizing the federal surface transportation bill, including:

- Supporting local engagement in planning, decision-making and resource allocation
- Encouraging innovation and integration, for effective rural transportation outcomes
- Shifting resources, where appropriate, to address the most pressing rural needs and opportunities, locally-defined
- Creating integrated regional transportation, economic development, and land use planning and implementation

- Supporting greater attention to rural "place-making," through quality of life investments that offer amenities that attract people to work and live in small cities and towns.

Research findings show the importance of transportation investment and its ability to create both positive and negative outcomes in terms of economic development and quality of life for rural regions and communities.

"A positive cycle can be achieved by pursuing transportation investments that produce significant and positive quality of life outcomes for accessibility, safety, health and cost of living. These will improve prospects for economic development, which in turn will generate the resources for more investments in transportation.

"Conversely, transportation investment that does not give sufficient regard to quality of life outcomes are more likely to diminish the attractiveness of rural areas for economic development and may lead to unintended negative consequences for rural residents, including a reduced ability to pay for transportation improvements and services.

As Congress begins consideration of the transportation bill, RUPRI says five policy goals should serve as principles against which to assess whether the diverse components of this new legislation are actually positing policy innovations which can yield more positive, sub-

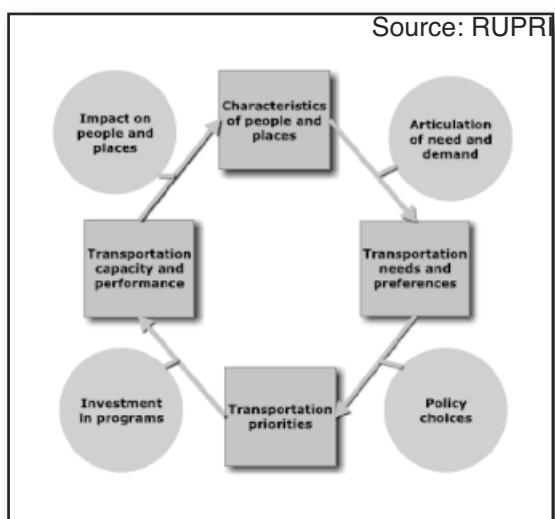


Figure 2 is a representation of the system for transportation policymaking. In an ideal world, transportation needs and preferences are determined by the characteristics of the current and future populations in a given region. These needs influence priorities, which in turn influence the configuration, capacity, efficiency and effectiveness of the transportation infrastructure.

stantial, and long-term outcomes for rural America, and thus for the nation as a whole. Rural residents should ask if the approach will:

- Build capacity to support local engagement in planning, decision-making and resource allocation?
- Encourage innovation and integration to enhance the efficacy and efficiency of these investments?
- Shift resources, where appropriate, to address the most pressing rural needs and opportunities?
- Encourage integrated regional planning and implementation? and
- Lead to improved quality of life in rural communities? Δ

Editor Sara Wyant publishes a weekly e-newsletter covering farm and rural policy called Agri-Pulse. For a four-week free trial, go to [www.Agri-Pulse.com](http://www.Agri-Pulse.com).