

NEW YORKERS FOR TRANSPORTATION EQUITY



REPORT 2024

WE GET AROUND NEW YORK



“[W]e inherited a transportation network that reflects decades of decision-making by our predecessors who ceded communities to motor vehicles. Communities where people could once walk, bike, and use public transit were divided, leveled, and reshaped to make way for the interstate highways and wide streets designed by our predecessors. Ideally, the transportation network would connect people to jobs, education, food, opportunities, and each other. But this has not actually been the case for decades. There is a lot to redo, and in some cases dismantle, and transportation projects can be expensive and take many years to implement.”

— **Veronica Davis**, *Inclusive Transportation*, p. 2-3

“I utilize the Capital District Transportation Authority (CDTA) to not only fulfill my community volunteer roles, but my personal needs as well. I have been diagnosed with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), Neuropathy, arthritis and high blood pressure. Each diagnosis comes with prescription medication. My diagnosis has not stopped me from living a full life, but the CDTA has. Transportation is often a barrier for me in meeting my physical, personal and community needs.”

— **Danyta Jefferson**, 55, Albany

INTRODUCTION

Whether we live in urban Buffalo, suburban Rochester or Long Island, small-town Catskills, or the rural Adirondacks, New Yorkers all deserve safe and reliable options to get around. Planners of the past, backed by the auto, tire, and fossil fuel industries, invested our transportation money in roads and highways — denying us the freedom to use forms of transportation that better serve our needs and the needs of our communities. In some cities, these interests literally divided us based on race: destroying Black neighborhoods with highways designed for white suburbanites, instead of funding transportation solutions that work for all of us. **New York has proven that people can win big reinvestments in public transportation, as advocates and communities successfully pressured Albany lawmakers to end the neglect of New York City’s iconic subway.**

With abundant federal infrastructure funding, our leaders can now afford us unparalleled freedom to access work, school, healthcare and other basic needs within and among our communities. State climate law and federal directives together demand a positive vision where more New Yorkers, particularly in disadvantaged communities, can choose to take more trips by public transit, walking and biking. Now, a new statewide transportation policy will help rural, suburban and urban New York alike survive and thrive as we repair the past, meet today’s needs and confront future challenges.

For too long, our Department of Transportation has built more and wider roads, only to find more drivers stuck in more traffic with more severe consequences for neighbors. As a result, our communities are fractured by highways; our streets are unsafe for kids, seniors and anyone outside a multiton vehicle; and once vibrant public transit systems are neglected and decaying. Most New Yorkers have been left dependent on a road network that doesn’t deliver on its promise and isolates as much as it connects us.

U.S. infrastructure law offers billions of dollars for surface transportation. New York could continue spending billions of dollars on highway projects that repeat and compound past mistakes. But a growing national trend in several states instead enacts robust laws to cut carbon emissions from transportation and invest in a broad spectrum of mobility options that provide better access for everyone. By joining this movement, New York can realign our infrastructure spending with our values, remedy past wrongs, revitalize our communities and free New Yorkers to seek and seize more opportunities.

SUMMARY

No matter where we live in New York, we want our communities to be inclusive and vibrant. Public transit and accessible walking and bike routes give us a healthy, affordable way to get around. New York is now receiving \$2.3 billion annually in new federal transportation dollars so now is the time to make this vision a reality. Current state spending plans specify a \$32.9 billion state Department of Transportation capital plan but the plan currently includes several wasteful, counterproductive highway expansion projects.

Delivering transportation equity and meeting our climate mandate require shifting course from car dependency to more options and freedom of mobility and access. Rather than double down on highway construction, our Department of Transportation must prioritize reducing the number of miles New Yorkers, commuters and visitors travel each year in vehicles. Accordingly, our governor and legislature must charge the Commissioner of Transportation with a new mandate that shifts policy and spending toward transit, cycling and walking projects — on a clear timeline.

New York's Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act commits the state to reduce greenhouse gas emissions 40% by 2030 and 85% by 2050. Expanding our highways would encourage more driving and exacerbate emissions instead. Even with more electric vehicles on our roads, electrification alone is **not nearly enough** to help New York's transportation sector meet its climate goals. New York must make investments in projects that mitigate the worst of climate change as it shows up on our **vulnerable shores** and in **wildfire smoke**, overwhelmed **storm drains** and sweltering urban **heat islands**, where **New Yorkers are most vulnerable**.

Last year, Minnesota made history with a new law requiring its Department of Transportation to cut vehicle miles traveled. Rocky Mountain Institute analysis, which showed that the North Star State would save \$91 billion by 2050 by offering more transportation options and freeing up Minnesotans to choose the best way to get around, motivated legislators to act. **With new legislation proposed by Assemblymember Karen McMahon and Senator Andrew Gounardes (A4120/S1981) to cut vehicle miles traveled 20% by 2050, New York should adopt the Minnesota approach, shifting the gears of transportation policy in favor of greater freedom and more access for New Yorkers.**

OUR VISION

All New Yorkers, from elementary school to our senior senior citizens, regardless of income or ability, deserve the freedom to get around within and among our communities. Delivering on the promise of that freedom will take time. Mindful of requirements to advantage disadvantaged communities, policymakers must prioritize people and areas most vulnerable to isolation and disconnected from opportunity. But work must begin all across the state, in rural, suburban and urban neighborhoods at once.

Rural communities depend heavily on cars but not every household has access to a vehicle and not every rural New Yorker can drive. Rural New York needs more and better options as small, sometimes isolated communities age and at the same time strive to keep and attract young families and small businesses.

- Safe opportunities for walking and cycling, including sidewalks, bike paths, and accessible ramps, are a must.
- Connections to expanded local and regional greenway trail networks along waterways, former rail lines and public utility rights of way will breathe social and economic life into hamlets and villages across the state.
- Transit networks that better serve and connect outlying communities beyond large towns and cities, and provide more extensive paratransit service, will break down barriers between neighbors and combat social isolation.

Suburban communities need more freedom to travel for people in every generation and of every ability.

- Public transit enhancements and safer streets with sidewalk and cycling upgrades will afford better access to employment, education, retail and healthcare centers.
- New options for short trips will help free parents from ferrying their kids everywhere and give kids the independence they need to combat anxiety and related struggles.

New York's cities boast growing public transit networks but need faster, more reliable bus routes and safer connections for walking and cycling among neighborhoods along heavily trafficked streets.

- Frequent transit service, with comfortable, dignified bus stops and rail stations are a must.
- Bus stops can be outfitted with heated pavement to melt snow and shelters that protect from the rain, sun, cold, and wind alike.
- Across our cities, New Yorkers should be able to access opportunities and services without the cost of car ownership, in excess of \$12,000 annually, on top of rising housing costs.

OUR VISION

From the Bronx River Parkway to the Governor Thomas E. Dewey Thruway, New York led the nation for decades in connecting our communities by car – but now it’s time to **give every New Yorker more freedom to travel around the state.**

- The Erie Canalway and Empire State Trail inspire pride, but many more abandoned and active railways and waterways and the communities they serve are ready for reactivation for active transportation, including on Long Island and across the Southern Tier, which are unserved today.
- However scenic they are, the shortcomings of New York’s Amtrak and coach bus service routes induce many more New Yorkers than necessary to fly or drive within the state and merit reinvestment for fast, frequent, reliable service to attract riders.

Projects affording more freedom to get around should center communities where disinvestment or the wrong kind of investment has thrown up the most obstacles to mobility.

- New York’s Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act requires state leaders to invest or direct resources to ensure that disadvantaged communities receive at least 35 percent, with the goal of 40 percent, of overall benefits of New York’s spending on clean energy and energy efficiency programs.

State agencies and entities must also prioritize greenhouse gas emissions co-pollutant reductions, like harmful particulate matter in engine exhaust, and ensure their decision-making does not disproportionately burden disadvantaged communities.

- The federal Justice40 Initiative, pursuant to Executive Order 14008, sets a similar goal that 40 percent of the overall benefits of federal investments in areas like transportation infrastructure flow to disadvantaged communities that are marginalized, underserved, and overburdened by pollution.
- Transportation planner Veronica Davis told CityLab: **“Equity is about looking at who is the most impacted and harmed, and asking, ‘How do we get them to a place of normalcy?’** I [use] the metaphor of an emergency room, with people coming in and being treated for their various problems. But if someone arrives in crisis and should be triaged, let’s treat that person first. It’s the same with our communities — let’s first put our resources where they are needed most.”

OUR VISION

As part of a just transition, reinvesting transportation funds to unite and connect communities through robust walking, cycling and transit infrastructure will create good-paying jobs for generations to come.

- Repairing roads and other infrastructure and investing in public transit creates more jobs per dollar than expanding or building new roads.
- According to the landmark Cornell study Reversing Inequality, Combatting Climate Change: “Investing in the maintenance, enhancement, and expansion of New York State’s approximately 130 public transit systems is key to reducing [vehicle miles traveled] and global warming pollution.” (p. 40).

A better connected New York, where more New Yorkers have more freedom to get around, will confront social isolation and combat loneliness. Laid bare by the pandemic, these ills undercut the vitality of our state and all of our communities

- The U.S. Surgeon General, in a signal report on Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation, recommends that state governments “[u]tilize a “Connection-in-All-Policies” Approach,” including “increased access to public transit, which allows individuals to physically connect more easily” (p. 55).
- As Nicholas Lalla wrote in Fast Company about the difficulty of healing communal trauma: “For many U.S. cities, the challenge is twofold: a lack of connectivity because of poor public transportation and walkability and a lack of urban parks, which could lead to a fraying of social cohesion were the worst to happen.”

The freedom to meet basic needs and access services must be centered to let New York’s seniors age in place and continue to play leading roles in the lives of our communities

- In many communities the fastest growing population cohorts are aging out of cars: one in five people over the age of 65 doesn’t drive; 35% of women over 75 don’t drive
- Just the preliminary report for Governor Hochul’s State Master Plan for the Aging mentions “transportation” 31 times, revealing what a pressing concern it is for New York’s senior citizens, their advocates, families, and caregivers

THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

A century of planning malpractice

“Our car dependency is not the product of market forces but public policy. Cars are the most publicly subsidized transit in the United States, which would have significantly fewer users if 80% of federal transportation funds didn’t go towards its infrastructure. The construction of freeways, the upkeep of car-only roads and parking, and cheap over-drilled gas funded by fossil fuel subsidies constitutes one of the largest public transit programs in the world.” — **Darrell Owens, Writer and Activist**

The United States wasn’t just the first car dependent nation and it isn’t just the most car dependent nation. It’s also the nation where the car became synonymous with our most familiar national value – freedom. Yet like American freedom as a whole, the supposed freedom to drive is readily denied countless Americans, whether due to income, age, ability, sobriety or other reasons, isolating vast numbers of people without alternatives. **Freedom to drive is no such thing it’s not a right to travel, a guarantee of access or mobility it’s an exclusionary dependency.**

To further U.S. dependency on cars, decades of federal law and spending policy divided or destroyed innumerable communities and recklessly worsened deep racial divisions by building highways. As a result of the same dependency, many more Americans per capita now die or are severely maimed in traffic crashes every year than in any other rich country, and the disparity is rapidly growing with ghastly results. **While climate action is challenging in any circumstances, policymakers laid out much of the country, housing Americans far apart from each other on a cratering certainty of cheap cars, cheap gas, and no consequences.**

Since the start of the interstate highway era, when it immediately became clear that highway construction destroyed cities, costing billions in lost home values alone, federal policy has gradually pulled back. First, highways had to be part of a state or local plan. Then, road projects had to be studied for adverse environmental impacts. Later, highway funds could be shifted to other transportation projects like public transit. Eventually, new subsidies were added to the highway funding reauthorization bill to fund small projects like bike paths and sidewalks. **While the interstate system is now officially done, highway builders still spend hundreds of billions of dollars in combined federal aid and state funds to expand and upgrade roads, to move cars and trucks to the exclusion of all other goals.**

THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Reckoning without reversal

Federal law is hamstrung by dissensus about whether and how we should address climate change. State leaders have enormous latitude to continue building massive highway projects. While federal infrastructure law permits climate-focused spending, it does not mandate it. When the most recent federal highway funding reauthorization was negotiated in 2021, there were efforts to add proportionately more funding for transit and require states to fix existing roads before building new ones but those amendments failed. Nor are federal officials shaping individual state decisions around the administration's vision of equity or environmental justice. When Congress finally passed a climate bill, it left car dependency alone: “[I]nstead of investing in public transit and dense, affordable housing, [the Inflation Reduction Act] doubles down on the strategy of replacing internal combustion engines with electric vehicles.”

The US Department of Transportation recently ordered states to calculate greenhouse gas emissions associated with road construction and then establish declining emissions targets to guide planning. Even the modest Net Zero Highway Rule, meant to cast sunshine on the climate impacts of transportation spending, is highly controversial and may meet defeat in court. The rule requires states to project the likely greenhouse gas emissions associated with major transportation projects.

The measure has no teeth Congress won't let USDOT withhold funds for failure to cut emissions but Congressional opponents and at least 21 states have vowed to defeat the rule anyway in a climate denying lawsuit to avoid public disclosure. Meanwhile, 14 states, including NY, and DC countered by thanking USDOT for the rule, a move that underlines the division among states. A change in administrations could also undo the rule on its own or with the help of additional legislation, should Congress be united under Republican leadership.

THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

States take the lead

In the federal vacuum, states are innovating, setting more ambitious transportation spending policies that direct a shift away from highways and toward transit, cycling and walking. Some states require their transportation officials to cut greenhouse gas emissions from transportation. Other policies go further, establishing that even electrifying every vehicle won't reduce emissions enough to address the climate crisis. Minnesota, for example, requires its transportation planners and engineers to design and implement projects that will reduce driving in the state, freeing Minnesotans to get around instead using transit, walking or biking.

California updated its state environmental impact review law to establish Vehicle Miles Traveled as the primary measure of transportation impacts, replacing Level of Service, which focuses on traffic congestion.

- If a proposed project would significantly increase VMT, transportation planners must consider mitigating the additional driving and greenhouse gas emissions
- Projects must consider the climate goals established in the state's Scoping Plan, including goals to reduce carbon emissions 40 percent below 1990 levels by 2030 and 85 percent below 1990 levels by 2045.

Colorado requires its Department of Transportation and five Metropolitan Planning Organizations to estimate and reduce transportation greenhouse gas emissions.

- First, agencies in the state must quantify anticipated greenhouse gas emissions from transportation projects and then reduce emissions over time.
- Instead of building projects that increase driving, authorities must instead change the transportation network to encourage riding transit, cycling or walking.

Minnesota requires its Department of Transportation to evaluate new projects for their impact on vehicle miles traveled and, if they are found to induce more driving, require additional funding for projects that will cut driving by the same amount or more.

- Project reviews include a new Transportation Greenhouse Gas Emissions Impact Assessment, which includes projected impact on vehicle miles traveled.
- A new Greenhouse Gas Emissions Impact Mitigation Working Group is overseeing implementation and progress toward emissions reductions guided by vehicle miles traveled.

THE NEW YORK STORY

Once the nation's preeminent population center, New York built up a massive infrastructural base before the rise of car dependency. In earlier eras, New Yorkers throughout the state could rely on pedestrian and equestrian travel, cycling, water transportation by river and canal, and rail, both within cities and over long distances, including subways, trolleys and mainline and branch railroads that served thousands of destinations, as well as cars, starting 120 years ago.

- Over **1,100 miles of electric streetcars** served urban, suburban and rural communities.
- The abandoned Buffalo Central railway terminal served over **200 trains each day**
- Rochester had a **7 mile long subway line** built in the bed of the old Erie Canal

New York City was extensively built out to an extreme density and boasted the world's largest subway network by the start of World War II, which still significantly skews state transportation spending and per capita greenhouse gas emissions. Other than that notable exception, and including vast portions of the postwar City itself, New York's transportation policymakers retrofitted urban, suburban and rural communities to accommodate cars just like the rest of the United States.

Albany had **electric street cars** beginning in 1889. Union Station on Broadway served **120 trains per day** during World War II. In the 1960s, transportation officials cut **I-787** through working class neighborhoods and cut downtown off from the city's waterfront. The state bulldozed downtown buildings for the **South Mall Arterial** connecting Empire State Plaza to I-787 and the Dunn Memorial Bridge. Today, **Capital District Transportation Authority** bus ridership is surging.

In addition to serving as a major rail hub and Great Lakes port, **Buffalo** had **dozens of electric streetcar lines** from the late 1800s to the 1950s and now has one light rail line operating since 1985. In the 1960s, engineers cut a trench for the **Kensington Expressway** (p. 13-14) through Buffalo's historically Black East Side, destroying homes, businesses and the **Humboldt Parkway**, which connected two large parks with a green boulevard, leaving air pollution and isolation in its wake. A current project supported by the federal **Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods program** is slated to **cap the expressway**, adding open space and improving air quality, but neighbors are concerned about construction impacts and some want the highway removed entirely.

THE NEW YORK STORY

New York's Catskill Mountains were served by several railroads beginning in the mid 19th century. Many abandoned lines now form a robust and growing network of rail trails open to walking and cycling. But the region also is the site of one of the largest planned highway expansion projects in the nation. State officials are considering spending a billion dollars to widen NY-17/I-86 from two to three lanes in each direction for 30 miles in Orange and Sullivan counties, adding traffic congestion and carbon emissions without provision for improved public transit, which is meager.

Long Island once had extensive trolley service, connecting communities both north to south as well as east to west like the Long Island Rail Road. Now it is crisscrossed by Robert Moses' expressways and parkways, including the infamous Southern State, with bridges too low for bus service from New York City to Jones Beach. New York is still planning highway expansion (p. 128) at Suffolk County's Oakdale Merge. As a result in part of car dependency designed into the landscape, traffic crash deaths are surging, devastating families and communities. In 2023, Governor Hochul's proposal to address New York's housing shortage founded in significant part on concerns about increased congestion on Long Island roads. While the entire island, including Brooklyn and Queens, is home to eight million New Yorkers, a plan to connect to the Empire State Trail is making slow progress, not yet fully funded nor prioritized by state leadership.

With several million public transit riders, **New York City** boasts a world famous subway network suffering nearly a century of deferred maintenance and the largest but slowest bus system in the United States. Highway builder Robert Moses notoriously cut through working class communities, destroying entire neighborhoods with the Cross Bronx and Brooklyn Queens Expressways (BQE), among others. Even today, state leaders are spending \$5 billion on widening the Belt Parkway, Bruckner Expressway, FDR Drive, and Van Wyck Expressway and City leaders are seeking federal aid to expand the BQE through dense environmental justice communities while important new transit connectivity projects remain unfunded or even unplanned.

THE NEW YORK STORY

Once a major rail hub and maritime port, **Rochester** was also the smallest city with a subway, portions of which started out as a canal bed and ended up as a highway. In the 1950s, transportation officials demolished 1,300 homes and businesses downtown to build the Inner Loop, a highway whose demolition was planned beginning in 1990 and recently yielded 110 new homes as part of an affordable housing infill development. A new Active Transportation Plan “consists of 182 recommended projects to improve pedestrian, accessibility, and bicycle infrastructure” that could be accomplished with increased funding.

Syracuse was served by electric street cars until the eve of World War II and briefly offered commuter rail service from 1994 to 2007. The city is also home to I-81, where officials overlooked community protest and razed 1,300 homes in the predominantly Black 15th Ward. The project is now the largest highway removal in the nation, approved by the federal government in 2022 at an estimated cost of \$2.25 billion.

The New York story holds enormous promise. Not only do we have great infrastructural bones on which to build, we also have shining examples of recent progress. We also have a highway building habit that’s proving hard to kick. Realigning transportation policy around transit, cycling and walking in all of our communities and away from driving dependency will unleash new energy and investment and deliver a New York where everyone has more freedom of movement than we have today.



OUR PROPOSAL

By reinvesting federal transportation aid in transit, active transportation and safe, connected streets, New York leaders can make all of our communities fairer, more livable and vital places, resilient against climate change and other challenges. The Rocky Mountain Institute estimates that, by 2050, a 20 percent decrease in national Vehicle Miles Traveled per capita could avoid up to 6,000 annual fatalities, \$259 billion in annual vehicle fuel and maintenance costs, and 2.3 gigatons of carbon dioxide equivalent. A New York where New Yorkers have many more opportunities to get around without depending on cars will be stronger, healthier, and more attractive to locals and newcomers alike.

Adoption of Minnesota's breakthrough new law was driven in part by a Rocky Mountain Institute analysis showing that the state could save \$91 billion by 2050 by offering more transportation options and freeing up Minnesotans to choose the best way to get around. According to the model, reduced costs of operating a car or truck will save households \$35 billion. Cutting traffic deaths and injuries will save the state \$54 billion. Health benefits from active transportation and improved air quality are projected to save an additional \$2 billion. A similar analysis is in the works for all 50 states, including New York. **Starting with new legislation proposed by Assemblymember Karen McMahon and Senator Andrew Gounardes A4120 S1981 to cut vehicle miles traveled 20 by 2050, New York should build on the Minnesota approach, shifting the gears of transportation policy in favor of greater freedom and more access for New Yorkers.**

Conclusion Governor Hochul and the Legislature Must Act For Freedom of Movement, Mobility, and Access

Federal funding provides enormous benefits but only if state policymakers spend it well. Several decades of highway spending have disconnected New Yorkers from one another. Centering transit, cycling and walking and charging transportation officials with reducing rather than encouraging driving will free up billions of dollars for new projects and make New York a much better, fairer, resilient place to call home.

