



June 12, 2025

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Joint Committee on Transportation Reinvestment
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court St. NE, Salem, OR 97301

Re: *Connecting the DOTs: A survey of state transportation planning, investment, and accountability practices*

Dear Co-Chairs McLain and Gorsek, Vice-Chairs Boshart Davis and Starr, and members of the Committee,

In 2017 when I was a researcher at the University of Oregon, my team was able to study in detail the transportation accountability and transparency practices of only six states: California, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Tennessee, Utah, and Virginia.¹

Recently, researchers at the Brookings Institution looked at all 50 states.²

Attached please find their recommendations for state legislators, governors, and departments of transportation.

Thank you for your commitment to delivering value to people and businesses in Oregon.

Sincerely,

Rob Zako
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Attachment:

Connecting the DOTs: A survey of state transportation planning, investment, and accountability practices (excerpt)

¹ Lewis, R., Zako, R., Lewis, R., Biddle, A., & Isbell, R. (2018). *Effectiveness of Transportation Funding Mechanisms for Achieving National, State and Metropolitan Economic, Health and Other Livability Goals*, trec.pdx.edu/research/project/875.

² Tomer, A. & Swedberg, B. (2024), *Connecting the DOTs: A survey of state transportation planning, investment, and accountability practices*, www.brookings.edu/articles/connecting-the-dots-a-survey-of-state-transportation-planning-investment-and-accountability-practices.

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Connecting the DOTs: A survey of state transportation planning, investment, and accountability practices

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Ben Swedberg, Senior Research Assistant, Brookings Metro

November 12, 2024

Recommendations

While state departments of transportation may have [originally](#) been formed to help construct highways and promote safety on those roads, their mandate has evolved. This century demands a more flexible framework to promote accessibility, safety, and resilience in every community. Expectations around accountability are now higher too. External stakeholders and the interested public rightfully expect state officials to clearly explain why they're investing in specific transportation projects—and give them genuine opportunities to offer their input during both planning and project selection stages.

States should continue to update their policies for this new era. Fortunately, every state DOT [department of transportation] starts with significant operational strengths. Their staff know how to put public dollars to work quickly in constructing projects large or small. State DOT leadership maintain established relationships with federal officials, particularly around fiscal accounting. Many central and regional DOT offices have built trust with their municipal partners to co-develop project strategies by committing to regular communication and even sharing staff. And most state-owned transportation assets are in good physical condition.

To build on those strengths, federal and state officials should adopt reforms that target areas ripe for improvement. Local stakeholders, including municipal officials and civic organizations, can engage with these recommendations by advocating for their adoption or implementation. Fortunately, this report uncovered many accountability-focused practices from across the country that could be considered in peer states. Using the findings and specific examples as a guide, we recommend the following reforms:

For state legislators and governors

This research revealed the starting point of each state DOT, both in terms of public accountability systems and direct community support. As elected leaders consider reforms tailored to their state's unique transportation needs and legal circumstances, this research highlights a set of policies that could be seen as benchmarks for every state to consider. (Note: Many of these policies could also become requirements under federal law.)

- States should **ensure every goal within their LRTP [long-range transportation plan] includes targeted implementation strategies and published performance measures**. During the plan's writing phase, every state should require input from non-state government staff, including independent commissions. This would complement public comment periods after a draft plan is published. Legislatures can also follow Minnesota and Washington's lead and enshrine the goals within their state legal code.

- States should **adopt public-facing project scoring systems**. Those systems should be informed by an advisory board that works with DOT staff to consider different measurement variables. Ideally, those scoring systems should have ways to simultaneously consider multimodal projects, in the same vein as the new Minnesota state law.
- When developing the Transportation Improvement Program for each substate region, states should **develop methods to ensure local and regional stakeholders have an equal voice**, particularly around expansion projects. One approach to model is New Hampshire's, where the state DOT has executed a memorandum of understanding to advance regional priority projects without changes, provided that they are fiscally constrained. Prior to finalizing each updated list, the published document should include the year a project was added and a connection to one or more LRTP goals.
- Legislatures should pass—and governors should support—the **creation of independent and empowered transportation oversight commissions**. Each commission should require the legislature and governor to have nominating authority, necessitate inclusion of members who work outside of government, and empower members to review the LRTP, funding sources and cost projections, and economic, social, and environmental impacts of past and future transportation projects.
- Legislators can **adopt programming that increases direct funding to MPOs [metropolitan planning organizations] and localities**. Current practices from states such as Arizona and California can serve as models for boosting direct funding. An additional consideration could be giving localities more additional funding to select projects, but also allowing them to transfer funding back to the state DOT if its staff can deliver projects faster and cheaper.

For state DOTs

Finally, there are multiple steps that state DOT leadership can take on their own without waiting for federal or state guidance.

- Many of the emerging challenges that the country's transportation system should address—including pedestrian safety, industrial site development, and protecting people from extreme heat—play out at the local level, including the need to coordinate land use and transportation policies. State DOTs should **be open to shifting their state-local collaboration model** to one where regional and local partners take the lead on [community engagement](#) and establishing project priorities, while state DOT staff bring their technical expertise and fiscal resources to accelerate project construction. Both can also work together more closely on [performance measurement practices](#).
- The success of the current asset management programs—both in terms of prioritizing maintenance projects and building public trust—should inspire an expansion to **monitor and report locally owned asset quality**. Integrating local conditions into the statewide TAMP [transportation asset management plan] will give state

policymakers a more holistic understanding of where investment dollars are most needed. The major beneficiaries of such an expansion would be system users. Similar to the federal recommendation, setting a ceiling on roadway quality could promote more investment in more roadway segments.

- Each state DOT can **update public-facing communication practices** to help external, non-transportation stakeholders better understand planning timelines and procedures. Updating procedural flowcharts on the agency website, improving public input practices, and promoting competitive grant opportunities could all build public trust and enhance DOT staff's understanding of what communities want. State DOTs should also consider publicizing the inputs, analysis, and scores used by and generated within project selection systems.