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Will state transportation agencies stick to their plans and fund top priority projects?

New report examines future transportation spending across 50 states, but history shows how much those plans differ from past practice

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A new report from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign (http://www.trackstatedollars.org/media/documents/Tracking_State_Dollars-FINAL.pdf) examines proposed state-level transportation spending in each of the 50 states, breaking down expenditures into four main categories – road and bridge maintenance, bike and pedestrian projects, public transit and new bridge and road capacity. Its findings suggest a serious change in direction from past practices.

"It's important to note that the Tri-State report is based on an analysis of State Transportation Improvement Programs, so it's looking at planned funding, not necessarily real spending," says Geoffrey Anderson, President and CEO of Smart Growth America. "That these state plans emphasize road and bridge repair, safety measures and public transit is refreshing, but we'll have to wait to see if these priorities are maintained."

"When you look at the most recent data for actual spending, it shows that what many state DOTs have been doing is badly neglecting their existing systems in favor of adding new capacity."

The Tri-State report, "Tracking State Transportation Dollars," claims that, on average, states will spend 20 percent of their transportation dollars on transit, 2 percent on bicycle/pedestrian projects, 39 percent on projects that maintain roads and bridges, and 23 percent on projects that add new capacity to roads and bridges. In a 2011 study of only road repair and new capacity projects (http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/repair-priorities), however, Smart Growth America found that the actual average state spending on these transportation programs broke out much differently. Between 2004 and 2008 States spent an average of 36 percent more on road expansion projects than they did on road repair projects, based on data collected from the states by the Federal Highway Administration.

"The planned spending figures highlighted in the Tri-State report seem to indicate that states are coming to grips with the huge backlog of upkeep and maintenance that need to get done," Anderson says. "According to SGA's most recent analysis, states would collectively need to spend $43 billion every year for 20 years to bring roads currently in poor condition up to good and then keep roads in good condition going forward. To put this number in perspective, it is a higher level of spending than what states are currently spending on all repair, preservation and new capacity combined."

"To be honest, many of these repair projects are so behind and so large that even this apparent shift in planned funding might not be enough."

"If state leaders stick to the plans and make sure that we're continuing to invest in existing infrastructure, communities, travelers and taxpayers will benefit tremendously. It's worth noting, though, that it's notoriously difficult to understand the DOT planning documents and that plans can change. Good projects can be put off. For me, I'll wait to see where the money actually goes before I get too excited."

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