

Transportation Equity Caucus

April 8th 2024

The Honorable Brian Schatz,
Chair, Subcommittee on Transportation,
Housing and Urban Development, and
Related Agencies
Senate Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Tom Cole,
Chair, Subcommittee on Transportation,
Housing and Urban Development, and
Related Agencies
House Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Cindy Hyde-Smith,
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on
Transportation, Housing and Urban
Development, and Related Agencies
Senate Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Mike Quigley
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on
Transportation, Housing and Urban
Development, and Related Agencies
House Appropriations Committee

Dear Chair Schatz, Ranking Member Hyde-Smith, Chair Cole, and Ranking Member Quigley,

As you begin your work on the Transportation, Housing and Urban Development (THUD) appropriations bill, the organizations below, members of the Transportation Equity Caucus (TEC) and friends, ask you to continue the focus on equity programs for fiscal year (FY) 2025.

The Transportation Equity Caucus is a diverse coalition of organizations promoting policies that ensure access, mobility, and opportunity for all. The Caucus works collaboratively to transform the transportation systems in Black, Indigenous, and communities of color (BIPOC), low-income communities, and other marginalized communities through research, advocacy, and communications strategies.

The undersigned organizations ask for your active support of the following programs:

- **Healthy Streets Program**
- **Reconnecting Communities**
- **Thriving Communities**
- **Public Transportation Programs**
- **Active Transportation Infrastructure Investment Program (ATIIP)**

The funding levels proposed below represent what is necessary to realize the intended benefits of each program – many of which are supported by authorizations from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). Unfortunately, the budgetary limitations enforced by the Fiscal Responsibility Act mean that many programs may ultimately be funded at levels insufficient to fully realize their benefits. While we are disappointed by these limitations, we appreciate any efforts by the Appropriations Committee to maintain the foundation of support these programs need to operate effectively in FY 2025.

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Healthy Streets Program

The Healthy Streets Program is a new program created under the IIJA with an authorization of \$100 million annually. This program supports equitable, climate-smart investment in our urban infrastructure and would fund projects that reduce flooding, improve air quality and mitigate the urban heat island effect within low-income neighborhoods and communities of color by providing grants to state and local governments, as well as nonprofits, to plant trees and deploy smart surfaces, such as reflective pavement in urban heat islands and porous pavement in flood prone areas. The program would also fund assessments of urban heat islands and tree canopies with a specific focus on areas of extreme heat and poor air quality, including equity mapping of tree canopy gaps, flood-prone locations, and urban heat island hot spots in relation to communities of color, low-income populations, and transit stops and pedestrian walkways.

Since surface infrastructure materials in urban areas are traditionally selected based on lowest initial cost, most city surfaces are dark and impervious, absorbing roughly 90% of incoming heat and increasing water runoff and localized flooding. For this reason, cities are becoming increasingly hotter (the urban heat island effect), less equitable, and more prone to flooding.

Urban heat islands pose a serious threat to public health, particularly for children, the elderly, people with respiratory illnesses, and those who work outdoors. High temperatures also intensify air pollution in cities by creating smog, a dangerous pollutant that can make it difficult to breathe, triggering asthma attacks and spiking emergency room visits. Areas of urban heat island disproportionately affect low-income communities and communities of color, where walking, biking and taking transit for transportation can be an economic necessity¹. Addressing heat islands, reducing flooding and planting trees near pedestrian walkways and transit stops respects the dignity and comfort of all our people when using our transportation system. Climate change will increase the prevalence and severity of these threats over the coming years. Significant investments now could help mitigate the worst impacts.

We request that you fund the Healthy Streets program at \$100 million in FY 2025, as authorized under the IIJA..

Reconnecting Communities

IIJA established a new Reconnecting Communities Pilot ([RCP](#)) discretionary grant program, funded with \$1 billion over the next 5 years.² We applaud the administration for their efforts to reconnect communities, including a disproportionate number of Black and brown communities, that were previously cut off from economic opportunities by transportation infrastructure.

Starting in the 1950s, federal highway funds were used to construct highways to remove homes

¹ Hsu, A., Sheriff, G., Chakraborty, T. et al. Disproportionate exposure to urban heat island intensity across major US cities. *Nat Commun* 12, 2721 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-021-22799-5>

² Press Release, Department of Transportation, *Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program – Planning Grants and Capital Construction Grants*, Oct. 14, 2022, <https://www.transportation.gov/grants/reconnecting-communities>

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and businesses of Black and Latino persons deemed undesirable and construct a freeway system that erected physical boundaries separating people and communities of color.³ The physical isolation of neighborhoods of color effectuated by federally-funded highways isolated Americans on the basis of race and national origin from public facilities, services, quality schools and access to jobs outside the impoverished boundaries of these segregated neighborhoods.⁴ Cities like New Orleans and Houston have seen their Black communities decimated by highways.⁵ This isolation has caused lasting harms in Black and Latino communities in particular. For example, homes and businesses in the impacted Black and Latino communities have vastly lower property value than white communities.⁶

We request that you include \$102 million in your FY2025 appropriations bill for the RCP discretionary grant program, as authorized by IIJA. This program will continue the progress that has been made repairing past harms to underserved Black and Brown communities that have been disproportionately disconnected from vital economic services due to highway construction.

Thriving Communities

The [Thriving Communities Program](#) is an initiative to help disadvantaged, rural, and Tribal areas develop and deliver transformational community revitalization projects. No one knows their communities' needs better than those who live there, yet too often, small and disadvantaged communities lack the technical expertise and capacity to effectively compete for federal grants. Through the Thriving Communities Program, local areas receive intensive technical assistance to help them plan and develop a comprehensive pipeline of transportation and community revitalization projects. By participating in this program, these communities are empowered to utilize the historic funding provided under the IIJA to deliver infrastructure projects that meet their economic and community goals. While this program is not authorized under IIJA, it is a crucial program that provides technical assistance, planning, and capacity building support to communities, enabling them to advance transportation projects that support their goals and needs.

We request that you include \$75 million in the FY2025 appropriations bill for the Thriving Communities program. This funding will help more people access safe mobility choices, affordable housing, and economic opportunity, yielding long-term results for distressed communities across the country.

³ Deborah N. Archer, *White Men's Roads Through Black Men's Homes: Advancing Racial Equity Through Highway Reconstruction*, *Vanderbilt Law Review*, Oct. 2020, <https://cdn.vanderbilt.edu/vu-wp0/wp-content/uploads/sites/278/2020/10/19130728/White-Mens-Roads-Through-Black-Mens-Homes-Advancing-Racial-Equity-Through-Highway-Reconstruction.pdf>

⁴ Sarah Schindler, *Architectural Exclusion: Discrimination and Segregation Through Physical Design of the Built Environment*, *The Yale Law Journal*, Vol.124 No. 6, Apr. 2015, <https://www.yalelawjournal.org/article/architectural-exclusion>

⁵ Livia Gershon, *The Highway That Sparked the Demise of an Iconic Black Street in New Orleans*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 28, 2021, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/documenting-history-iconic-new-orleans-street-and-looking-its-future-180977854/>

⁶ Id.

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Transit funding

We ask you to include full funding in the FY2025 appropriations bill for public transportation programs authorized in the IIJA. For FY2025, the IIJA authorized \$14.2 billion in contract authority from the Highway Trust Fund and \$3.15 billion from general funds (along with \$4.25 billion in advance appropriations). These programs are extremely important for addressing continuing inequities in access to opportunity. Black and brown people are more likely to rely on transit, as are people with lower incomes. Yet many communities of color and low-income neighborhoods remain underserved, with infrequent and unreliable transit, which makes it more difficult for people to reach jobs, healthcare, and other services. Recognizing these challenges, the President and Congress promised a historic level of investment in transit through passage of the IIJA.

We want to call particular attention to the Capital Investment Grant ([CIG](#)) Program, which is authorized at \$3 billion for FY2025 (with an additional \$1.6 billion in IIJA advance appropriations). The CIG Program is the largest general-fund transit program, and has often been subject to cuts in the budget process. This program funds the construction or expansion of new transit lines in both large and small communities, with project evaluation based in part on considerations such as the project's integration with affordable housing and land use plans. As we confront high gas prices, unhealthy air, and continuing pandemic uncertainties, ensuring access to high-quality frequent transit for all must be a priority.

We request that you include \$3 billion, as authorized under IIJA, for FY2025.

Active Transportation Infrastructure Investment Program (ATIIP)

While we appreciate the inclusion of \$60 million for the Active Transportation Infrastructure Investment Program ([ATIIP](#)) in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 budget, we are disappointed that ATIIP is not included in the FY2024 Further Consolidated Appropriations Act nor the President's proposed budget for FY 2025. Securing this funding is essential to fully leverage the IIJA, facilitating the development and construction of safe, accessible walking, cycling, and public transportation routes. This investment will significantly improve the quality of life for millions of Americans, particularly those who cannot drive or choose alternative transportation options.

The provision of safe and accessible connections for walking and biking offers numerous advantages. It helps reduce climate emissions and alleviate traffic congestion by encouraging a shift to zero-emission transportation methods. Additionally, it meets the transport and economic needs of smaller towns looking to establish better connections between communities. Moreover, establishing active transportation networks is essential to address increasing fatalities and serious injuries among pedestrians and bicyclists, making routine travel safer for everyone.

Given the recent publication of the Department of Transportation's ATIIP Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) and the growing interest from communities nationwide in applying for these grants, we request you allocate \$200 million in FY2025, as authorized under IIJA.

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We urge both subcommittees to include and support these programs in FY 2025 to ensure that our transportation system is safe, clean, accessible, and equitable for all Americans.

Thank you for your consideration. Please contact Mende Yangden, Senior Associate for Equity and Community Partnerships, NRDC (myangden@nrdc.org), Joseph Reed, Rails to Trail Conservancy (jreed@railstotrails.org) and Axel Santana, Associate, PolicyLink (Asantana@policylink.org) with any questions.

Sincerely,

America Walks

Detroit Greenways Coalition

Equiticity

League of American Bicyclists

LivableStreets Alliance

Madison Area Bus Advocates

National Organizations for Youth Safety (NOYS)

Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC)

PolicyLink

Rails to Trails Conservancy

Riders Alliance

Safe Routes Partnership

Transportation for America

Union of Concerned Scientists