



City of Austin

P.O. Box 1088, Austin, TX 78767-1088

Stephanie Pollack
Deputy Administrator, Federal Highway Administration
c/o Docket Management Facility
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Ave. SE, W12-140
Washington, DC 20590-0001

Re: FHWA-2021-0021-0054

Dear Administrator Pollack:

Thank you for providing cities and the general public the opportunity to comment on the implementation of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL). The City of Austin (the City) welcomes the new funding streams, and, especially, the opportunity for FHWA to shift its administrative processes to better emphasize sustainable and equitable transportation infrastructure.

Austin has been recognized nationally as one of the fastest growing cities and has been experiencing unprecedented growth in both its population and economy for over two decades. Austin's [demographic story](#) continues to revolve around the three major themes of: 1) rapid and sustained job and population growth; 2) transformative demographic diversification; 3) and, stubborn structural and spatial socioeconomic separations. Since 2010, the Austin metro gained about 579,014 residents, a 34% population growth, according to [U.S. Census Bureau figures](#) from May, 2021. In the same period, Austin's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) [increased](#) 85% from 90,906 to 168,435 (millions of dollars). Austin has developed into a regional center, attracting large corporations to relocate or expand here such as Amazon, Google, Tesla, Apple, SpaceX, and more.

Furthermore, data on [commuting patterns](#) has shown that as of 2017, over 42% of the Austin region's workforce commutes less than 10 miles, a greater share of mileage traveled than either Dallas or Houston. Due to these influxes, Austin is now focused on supporting this economic and population boom by investing in sorely needed infrastructure and shifting to multi-modal and equitable transportation system plans.

In 2019, the Austin City Council approved the Austin Strategic Mobility Plan (ASMP) which guides our department's transportation investments and policy priorities. Among the goals outlined in the ASMP are reducing the city's mode share of single-occupant vehicles to 50% by 2039 and building out a complete active-transportation network. The BIL and your December 16, 2021 memo align in many respects with our local, council-adopted policies. The City especially appreciates the memo's focus on the state of good repair, vulnerable road users, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, resilience, and addressing the impacts of previous generation surface transportation investments on disadvantaged communities.

The memo and the policy shift it outlines are welcome. However, the reality remains that the bulk of BIL surface transportation funding will continue to be allocated by formula to state DOTs, transit agencies, and, to a lesser extent, MPOs, and that they will continue to make decisions about investment of federal surface transportation funds. The City recognizes that Congress has provided FHWA with limited tools to meet the goals outlined in the December 16, 2021 memo and the subsequent guidance documents, such as the January 14, 2022 guidance document for the new Bridge Formula Program. The City therefore recommends that the FHWA use all of its available tools to promote compliance with the goals outlined in your December 16, 2021 memo.

In particular, as you make decisions about competitive grant programs, the City supports your direction to staff to emphasize projects that:

- Advance safety for all road users;
- Retrofit streets and other transportation facilities to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act;
- Reconnect communities, particularly communities of color, that have been separated by transportation facilities, such as I-35 through Austin;
- Maximize existing right of way to safely accommodate multiple modes; and
- Direct funding toward local arterials and collectors not on the National Highway Network.

We would also encourage you to include in the evaluation criteria the investments already made by local governments that are committed to mobility. Many local governments are already making transformative investments to meet these goals and are well placed to leverage federal funds to quickly and effectively meet FHWA's policy goals and effectuate the transformation envisioned in your December 16, 2021 memo. For example, in Austin, our voters in 2016, 2018, and 2020 overwhelmingly approved the issuance of over \$2 billion in bonds, with the bulk of those funds going towards investments in such projects. Combined, these funds will help make the improvements necessary to address the increasing needs of this fast-growth community as well as assist in alleviating the backlog of critical safety and mobility improvements.

[Proposition 1 \(2016\)](#) will invest \$720 million in Austin mobility for local, corridor and regional mobility improvements:

- \$37.5 M for Sidewalks
- \$27.5 M for Safe Routes to School (to be divided evenly among each Council District)
- \$26 M for Urban Trails (for transportation and mobility purposes)
- \$20 M for Bikeways (for transportation and mobility purposes)
- \$15 M for Fatality Reduction Strategies (for projects listed on Top Crash Location Intersection Priorities Improvement List)
- \$482 M for Multi-Modal Corridor Projects for transit and reduce delay
- \$101 M for Regional Mobility Projects for safety and congestion

[Proposition G \(2018\)](#) will invest \$160 million in Austin mobility, with almost all funds focused on state of good repair, vulnerable users, and active transportation:

- \$66.5M for street reconstruction,
- \$50M for bridges,

- \$20M for sidewalks,
- \$15M for Vision Zero,
- \$4.5Mm for signals and technology,
- \$3M for urban trails, and
- \$1M for a Neighborhood Partnering Program.

[Proposition B \(2020\)](#) will invest \$460 million in Austin mobility, with, again, almost all funds focused on state of good repair, vulnerable users, and active transportation:

- \$80M for sidewalks,
- \$40M for bikeways,
- \$65M for Vision Zero,
- \$20M for Safe Routes to School,
- \$19M for local transit enhancements,
- \$1M for a Neighborhood Partnering Program, and
- \$53Mm for substandard streets

[Proposition A \(2020\)](#) will provide the local match for [Project Connect](#), a comprehensive new transit system that includes two new light rail lines, including a downtown subway, a new commuter rail line, and new bus rapid transit, express bus, a neighborhood circulator routes. It also includes \$300 million for transit-supportive anti-displacement housing strategies.

As we celebrate this pivot in agency direction, the City would like to offer additional comments on how FHWA might implement the BIL and its competitive grant programs. Our comments largely relate to transparency, the role of MPOs and state DOTs in funding allocation, performance metrics, and putting transportation investment in the broader context of land-use planning. Our comments are summarized below, and the City has attached a spreadsheet that identifies specific sections for comment. We hope that these comments are constructive and help FHWA achieve its goals of creating a more equitable and sustainable transportation system.

TRANSPARENCY

The process of applying for and receiving federal highway aid is often opaque, particularly for jurisdictions that do not have a history of receiving major federal grants. It would be very useful to see the submittals that receive competitive grant awards. Please consider publishing the application materials for successful proposals for major grants such as RAISE.

The ways that states use and allocate federal highway aid is also often opaque. Major planning documents such as the STIP and UTP contain a lot of quantitative data, but the way that these documents are published make them difficult to analyze. Although the project lists and funding sources would lend themselves to structured data formats like spreadsheets, this information is often published in long pdf documents with the data spread across multiple unstructured pages. Please consider publishing the financials on data portals such as data.gov or state data portals. This would afford the public better opportunities to compare state spending across regions or by project type.

FUNDING ALLOCATION

In many cases, our local adopted policies, while aligning with federal policies, differ from the priorities of our state DOT and local MPO. Because many federal transportation funds pass through or are administered by these subnational entities, they present a barrier to implementing safe, multimodal transportation projects. The City is confident that it would deliver projects better aligned with USDOT's goals if direct funding for active transportation and safety were available to cities, rather than passed through state or regional entities.

TRANSPORTATION SUPPORTING COMMUNITY OUTCOMES

A [February 2015 study](#) ranked the Austin-Round Rock-San Marcos area the country's most economically segregated metro area with a population of 1 million or more, which has demanded a shift to multi-modal infrastructure to address the inequities in accessibility and connectivity. For example, recent City of Austin transportation system plans have been integrated with community considerations to balance our approach, including:

- Preservation of existing affordable housing
- Preservation of existing local businesses
- Opportunities for development of new affordable housing
- Opportunities to facilitate mixed-income housing
- Emphasizes livable, walkable, safe, and transit-supportive corridors
- Promotes healthy, equitable, and complete communities
- Prioritizes investments in traditionally underserved communities, low-income communities, and other vulnerable communities
- Anticipates unintended consequences that may disproportionately affect historically underserved and underrepresented populations and proactively mitigates these effects
- Maximizes opportunities to integrate green infrastructure, increase the urban tree canopy, complete open space connections, and enhance water quality

In order to avoid accessibility and connectivity inequities, transportation system plans must consider existing and future housing needs to effectively improve mobility, equity, and safety for all users while also mitigating carbon emissions. To tackle these issues, MPOs must be not just allowed, but strongly encouraged to have leadership that is proportionally representative by jurisdictions of the regions they represent.

PERFORMANCE BASED PLANNING

Transportation system improvements should be evaluated by criteria established in advance. For example, states should be able to demonstrate how their use of HSIP funds have reduced pedestrian and cyclist fatalities in the state. Without robust performance measures, states have little accountability in how they spend these public funds.

CONCLUSION

The City of Austin welcomes FHWA's new priorities for sustainable and equitable transportation investments. As Austin illustrates, cities are leading the charge in transforming our mobility system and we welcome FHWA's partnership to achieve our shared vision. Both the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and this new direction can catalyze significant changes in the transportation choices available to Americans. We look forward to the outcomes of this new direction and greater transparency at FHWA.

Thank you for taking the time to review and evaluate our comments.

Gina Fiandaca
Assistant City Manager, Mobility
City of Austin, Texas