



# Stateline

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Road construction and expansion programs have always been a popular way for states to help local communities. Now, though, policymakers are considering new transportation strategies that more fully incorporate other modes of transit and attempt to better meet the economic development needs of the state as a whole. Demographic trends, such as a rising elderly population and urban sprawl, also will have a significant effect on future transportation policy.



## New roadmaps

### Demographic, fiscal realities pose challenge to transportation planners

by Tim Anderson

Revenue from Iowa's road-use fund is used every year to invest \$1 billion in highway projects throughout the state. As in other states, Iowa has good reason for having such a large pot of money set aside for roads. For decades, road construction has been an important tool used by states to create jobs, promote economic development and improve the quality of life in communities.

But are states getting the most out of such a significant public investment? Last year, the Iowa Transportation Commission decided that question needed to be answered in its state.

"There were concerns that the money was being spent on a series of disjointed projects, with no kind of strategic plan," says David Forkenbrock, director of the University of Iowa Public Policy Center.

The commission turned to Forkenbrock for help. He has since issued a 48-page report, made a series of policy recommendations and is now holding town hall meetings that could ultimately result in a revamped transportation strategy for Iowa.

Forkenbrock's hope is that the new blueprint better meets the needs of the entire state, rather than just those of individual communities. The two, he says, are not always the same.

"One of the ideas behind this is to give legislators the ability to say no to projects that aren't consistent with what we're trying to pursue as a state," he says. "That's a hard thing to accom-

plish, because if the community wants to see a major road project built, it makes sense that you're going to do everything you can to get it. Your gas taxes aren't going to go up if you get the project, and they're not going to go down if you don't."

However, this kind of fragmented, locally based decision-making process doesn't necessarily make for a wise investment of state dollars, he argues. For example, it can lead to highways being built in areas where stagnant or declining populations don't warrant such construction. Or roadwork may simply have the effect of transferring business activity from one part of the state to another, rather than fostering additional economic development.

The proposed changes in Iowa are just one example of the transportation planning going on throughout the region. Along with creating a statewide vision, the new roadmaps are being designed to help states adequately respond to demographic trends such as an increasing elderly population, urban sprawl and rural depopulation.

### Doing more with less

These strategies also can help Midwestern states get the most out of their transportation dollars. As budget actions this year illustrate, the money available to pay for popular road projects has been limited by the current fiscal crisis.

More than \$300 million from Illinois' transportation fund was redirected as part of the state's final budget agreement, while Kansas policymakers earlier this year decided to withhold millions of dollars from a road highway fund. Meanwhile, Wisconsin Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle vetoed \$100 million in road spending projects approved by the Legislature, directing the money instead to health care programs.

And in Michigan, the most contentious budget issue involved Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm's plan to delay 34 new road projects in favor of a "preserve it first" transportation strategy.

"During these tight budgetary times, we must focus our efforts on fixing our existing infrastructure," announced Granholm, who, in a final

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# Elderly mobility, urban sprawl among key transportation issues

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compromise with the Legislature, ultimately agreed to move forward with 17 of the 34 projects.

The new fiscal realities exist at the same time there is a need for more infrastructure improvements and transportation investments. Across the Midwest, people are driving more miles and dealing with more traffic congestion. In some of the region's cities, transportation has become the single greatest household expense, surpassing even the cost of housing.

Another common transportation concern in the Midwest is the rise in the senior citizen population, particularly in rural areas where public transit options are limited. Iowa, for instance, has a higher percentage of people 85 and older than any other state in the country. By 2040, Minnesota demographers predict that 21 percent of the state's population will be 65 or older (compared to 12 percent in 2000).

Mobility is an essential part of a senior citizen's ability to remain independent, and some community-based programs already have tried to address those needs.

Kansas Sen. Larry Salmans, a Republican from Hanston, says parts of Kansas have had success with a Senior Companion Program, which provides people age 60 and older the opportunity to provide assistance to elderly individuals who are homebound and often living alone. That help includes meeting the frail elderly's transportation needs.

"If we would expand that program, it would be a tremendous help for all rural areas in the state," he says. "The fact of the matter is that a lot of communities in Kansas just don't have the infrastructure for public transportation, but we do have a strong neighbor-helping-neighbor attitude. The companion program really lends itself to that idea. It builds on the strengths we know we have in Kansas."

Some states also have begun to change road designs (by improving lighting, enlarging highway signs, etc.) to improve the safety of seniors who continue to drive.

Forkenbrock says Iowa's transportation strategy can help rural areas in other ways as well. In small communities relatively close to urban centers such as Des Moines, the state should ensure that a strong network of roads allows for safe commutes. In more isolated rural areas, an improved freight rail system that provides for growth in the value-added agriculture industry is needed.

"A lot of times, people in rural areas live close to where they work; that's not the problem," he says. "The issue is moving the goods they produce, and freight rail is a way to accomplish that."

## Needs in urban areas

The Midwest's cities and suburbs, meanwhile, have a unique set of transportation needs. Increases in population and concerns related to urban sprawl have placed more pressures on states to intervene in decisions that have traditionally been left to local communities. Wisconsin's Smart Growth Law now requires every community in the state to develop a comprehensive land use plan by 2010. This summer, Gov. Granholm's Michigan Land Use Leadership Council issued a series of recommendations on how the state can curb urban sprawl.

Among the council's suggestions is one calling on the state to invest more in public transit. A recent report by the Joyce Foundation, a Chicago-based organization, found that the Midwest has so far lagged behind other regions in

the country when it comes to developing transportation alternatives to roads. There have been notable exceptions, such as Minnesota's investment in a \$675 million light-rail project for the Twin Cities. Legislators also are discussing the possibility of constructing that state's first commuter line.

Overall, though, this region's policymakers have not taken full advantage of the flexibility given to them in recent federal transportation laws, says James Seidita, a program officer with the foundation.

"Building roads can be a good way of getting people around, but it shouldn't be the only way," he adds. His hope is that future state strategies will recognize the need to invest more fully in multiple modes of transportation. ✂

## Future modes of regional transportation could include high-speed rail

One potentially useful mode of transportation that has so far gone untapped in the Midwest is high-speed rail, but a group of lawmakers and transportation officials has been working to advocate and plan for such a system.

Proponents envision a 3,000-mile, regional high-speed rail network using existing, but upgraded, tracks that would have 110 mph trains servicing intercity travelers in the Midwest. Chicago would serve as the system's hub. Trains would not only run faster, but much more frequently as well.

The Midwestern Office of The Council of State Governments has actively promoted high-speed rail for this region, providing staff support for the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail

Commission. Formed by compact agreement in 2000, the commission includes state legislators and transportation department officials. Thus far, six Midwestern states — Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota and Ohio — are part of the MIPRC (every state in the region is eligible to join).

In addition, nine states are currently involved in the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative, a project that has studied the feasibility of an improved passenger rail system for the region and developed implementation plans. Despite growing support among policymakers in the region, the development of a revamped rail system for the Midwest is contingent on help from Washington, D.C. For that reason, much of the MIPRC's work has focused on lobbying efforts.

Commissioners traveled to the nation's capital in June to meet with members of the U.S. Congress about the American Passenger Rail Agreement, which calls for the development and preservation of a nationwide, interconnected passenger rail system. The proposal, which has the support of more than 100 groups nationwide, including CSG, also calls for a dedicated source of federal funding similar to what already exists for mass transit, airport and highway programs.

Rail advocates have been keeping a close eye on developments related to federal reauthorization of Amtrak and the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21). Funding for an improved rail system in the Midwest would most

likely come from one of these two sources.

If a regional high-speed rail network becomes a reality, proponents say it would greatly improve the Midwest's transportation structure by reducing congestion on roads and limiting the need for new ones. The system also could provide a viable alternative to air travel for passengers moving from one Midwestern city to another.

For example, according to the Midwestern Regional Rail Initiative's plan, someone traveling between Chicago and Minneapolis could choose among six different daily roundtrips. Time on the train would be cut by 2.5 hours, one way. Daily roundtrips between Chicago and St. Louis would take under four hours.



Midwestern legislators and transportation officials are working to secure the federal funding needed to develop an improved passenger rail system that would increase the frequency and speed of trains traveling between cities in this region. (photo: Talgo Rail)