

# US Investments in Infrastructure and Climate Are A Historic Opportunity

**At a tremendous \$1.2 trillion USD, the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) — also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law — constitutes the largest commitment to the United States’ physical framework thus far in its history.** Since it was passed, its size and proposed agenda have been the subject of lengthy discussion within public discourse. Amidst the flurry of analysis, what has become clear is how many challenges — and opportunities — lay ahead with this complex piece of legislation.



Top: Infrastructure funding should help create streets with priority for cycling, walking, and transit.  
Photo: Debbie Powell, Shutterstock

Bottom: People cycling down an open street in Cincinnati, OH.  
Photo: Brandon Hill, Pexels

The IIJA offers an opportunity to make major new investments with \$550 billion in new spending above baseline levels — over half of which (\$284 billion) is allocated to transportation. Significant amounts are being committed to public transit (\$39 billion), electric buses (\$7.5 billion), and programs to reconnect communities affected by inequitable policies (\$1 billion). To harness the potential of this funding, however, we need to make sure that measured steps are taken to focus it on efforts that promote sustainability, equity, and access. Otherwise, we run the risk of repeating patterns of unsustainable, top-down policies that are detrimental to our environment, our communities, and our health. Among other considerations, two major areas of concern need to be addressed if the IIJA is to make true progress for our transport systems.

First, we must curtail the US’ disproportionate emphasis on the capital construction and expansion of car-centric roads and highways at the expense of other transport modes, like public transit. A 2021 American Society for Civil Engineers report found that there exists a nearly \$176 billion deficit in the maintenance and capital needs of public transit systems nationally, a number that grows every year. At the same time, the largest portion of the IIJA’s above-baseline spending — \$110 billion — is earmarked primarily for roads, bridges, and highways. While the upkeep of existing road networks is



Top: The US needs to transform its car-first streets to include alternative modes of transport.

Photo: Heidi Besen, Shutterstock

Bottom: The IJJA has committed a historic level of funding to public transit systems.

Photo: Mike Dotta, Shutterstock

certainly crucial, it is also possible that much of this funding will go towards harmful and counterproductive new road construction and expansion projects.

For the IJJA to be a force for sustainable development, it is important that steps are taken to ensure new allocations to roads and highways are not used just for expansions that drive more greenhouse gas emissions. Funding could instead be allocated to transforming surface roads into complete streets with protected cycling lanes; or it could turn large roadways into multi-modal boulevards with pedestrian access; or it could fund the dismantling of highways altogether in favor of reconnecting urban neighborhoods.

For decades, private car use has been prioritized over public transit. This car-first culture has proven to be harmful to our environment and health by facilitating sprawling development, fuel consumption, emissions, and ecological decline. The result: transportation now accounts for the largest portion (27%) of the country's total emissions, with new cars and trucks contributing to a majority of that number, according to data from the US EPA. We cannot continue the US' history of ever-expanding roads and highways that put polluting cars over people. We have an opportunity with the IJJA to focus road spending on projects that prioritize safety, complete streets, and environmental conservation, rather than more new construction.

Second, it is imperative that IJJA's implementation acknowledges and addresses the systemic impacts that transport policies have had on low-income and minority communities, particularly in cities. It has been well documented that the construction of highways since the 1950s have had long-term detrimental effects on urban communities — razing whole neighborhoods, cutting off access to services and employment, and disproportionately exposing residents to pollution. Beyond physical sustainability, the IJJA includes funding commitments that have the potential to build — and repair — the social infrastructure of communities that have borne the brunt of discriminatory transport planning.

This process begins by rethinking the frameworks by which IJJA-funded grants are distributed by the US Department of Transportation (USDOT) and State-level DOTs. Previously, funding applications and evaluation methods perpetuated inequity by emphasizing 'shovel-worthy' projects that were most 'prepared' to receive competitive federal dollars, an approach that tended to benefit more well-resourced applicants.

To address this, new criteria have been developed to better guide discretionary funds directly distributed by the USDOT, with additional guidance and flexibility on funding rules provided to applicants. At the same time, formula funding distributed to and used by State-level DOTs — which is typically allocated based on predetermined Congressional formulas — requires more oversight and accountability on how it is dispersed at local levels.

It is also crucial that the rollout of new investments include a bottom-up approach that engages a spectrum of community-based organizations, advocates, and institutions in top-down funding decisions. On this front, some promising moves are being made, including the current Administration's partnership with the Communities First Infrastructure Alliance (CFIA), a dynamic group of organizations — including ITDP — tasked with working with technical assistance providers, communities, and public officials to center the needs of low-income communities of color in IIJA implementation.

The CFIA complements the USDOT's Transportation Equity Action Plan, which spotlights new infrastructure policies — including the removal of limited access highways and the reduction of overall transportation costs — aimed at addressing racial and wealth disparities in health, housing, and more. In addition, the Administration debuted the Justice40 Initiative in 2021, which sets a goal of ensuring that at least 40% of federal climate investments across multiple agencies go directly to communities most affected by poverty, pollution, and environmental injustice.

The federal government has also set up a line of communication with communities through the creation of a Technical Assistance Guide, which is geared towards helping local agencies access and navigate IIJA resources through a number of technical assistance programs. Given that over 90% of IIJA funding is expected to be deployed by non-federal partners, this is an opportunity for the government to make application processes more transparent while building the capacity of organizations and agencies that may not have access to traditional resources.

In the year since the passage of the IIJA, it is clear that this legislation has the potential to fundamentally change the state of US transport infrastructure — socially, physically, and economically. This can only occur, however, if officials take the opportunity to address the systemic issues that have plagued inequitable policies of the past. We finally have a major commitment of resources that can help us mitigate skyrocketing emissions, improve transit access, and reconnect communities nationwide. And public opinion is in favor — polling data from 2020 indicated that a majority of American voters desire alternatives to driving, support better public transit, and want existing roads to be improved before building new ones.

With the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act in the summer of 2022, the US now has another momentous legislative opportunity to address climate change on a national level — particularly when it comes to vehicle electrification and clean energy transitions — as every state focuses on building out charging infrastructure and updating grid capacity. Many of the implications of the IRA, however, still warrant further analysis. For either of these bills to truly have a positive impact on future generations and the planet, they need to shift existing paradigms around car culture and fuel dependency while placing community needs front and center. Then, and only then, can we build a new kind of infrastructure legacy — one that reckons with the past in order to move us all forward.



Above: Improving US infrastructure requires reconnecting neighborhoods divided by a legacy of highway construction.  
Photo: Rodnae Productions, Pexels

### About ITDP US

*ITDP's US Program partners with communities and municipalities from coast to coast to meet urgent climate and equity goals through technical advocacy, capacity building, strategic communications, and policy reform. ITDP's approach in the US centers equity in local communities while drawing knowledge from the organization's regional and global work.*