

DOTs in Conversation

Opportunities and Trends in 10 Midwestern State Departments of Transportation



INTRODUCTION

Transportation is the leading source of greenhouse gas emissions in the country and within the RE-AMP footprint (about 27% of total emissions). Transportation is one of our strategic priorities on the path to equitably eliminate greenhouse gases in the Midwest by 2050, and has been a core focus of the network since 2008. We work in 10 states: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin. Our Transportation Hub collaborates to enable people to get where they need to go without having to drive and to make motorized transportation cleaner.

State DOTs are key to eliminating greenhouse gas emissions because of the key role they play in shaping our transportation system. State DOTs work with regional organizations such as Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) to allocate certain federal funds, and conduct statewide planning. They also play a coordinating role across various transportation modes statewide. They own, design and maintain the primary highway systems, including the Interstate system, US highways, and state highways. Though these DOT-owned highways are only about a tenth of the road system by length, they carry a majority of our region's traffic and are the places where nearly half of our pedestrian fatalities occur. They connect communities, and are often the main streets going through our cities and towns.

Because of the key role DOTs play in shaping our transportation system, we wanted to better understand state DOTs, and the opportunities exist when working at the state DOT level to help achieve our goal. We found opportunities in every Midwestern state. This report provides a brief summary of key findings, and then allows you to dig deep into the DOTs of each of the ten RE-AMP states.

What makes this report different

This report is sourced from **conversations**, almost all of them between DOT staff and transportation advocates. We approached the research with an openness to hearing from the DOT of every single state, regardless of politics.

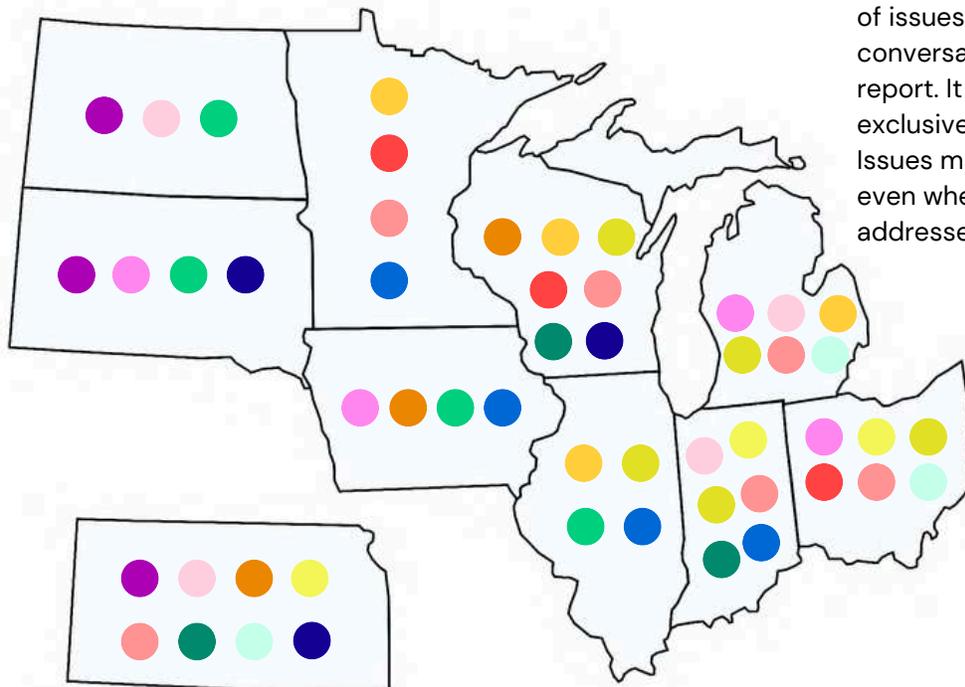
The staff we spoke to came from up and down the organizational hierarchy, and represented traffic safety, planning, multimodal transportation, and engineering divisions. Takeaways from these interviews make up the heart of this resource. [A companion guide of "Fast Facts"](#) can be found here to give a quick sense of the scope of our different DOTs.

One thing our conversations made clear: there are significant opportunities for local transportation advocates to work at the DOT level in **every state**. State-based advocacy organizations with community relationships and significant local knowledge are best positioned to work with their DOTs to build a transportation system that truly works for everyone.

KEY OPPORTUNITIES

We identified five key categories of opportunity at state DOTs: planning, project priorities, policies, public engagement, and people. These opportunities surfaced through discussions of work that advocates and their DOTs have already accomplished and can be further built upon, as well as discussions where DOT staff or advocates discussed the issue and identified a need for reform.

State by State Overview



Note: This map is a reflection of issues that surfaced in the conversations included in this report. It is not meant as an exclusive or definitive list. Issues may resonate in states even when not explicitly addressed and marked here.

Want to skip straight to a state's conversation? Click here: [IL](#) | [IN](#) | [IA](#) | [KS](#) | [MI](#) | [MN](#) | [ND](#) | [OH](#) | [SD](#) | [WI](#)

Planning

- Active Transportation Plans
- Required Planning Processes
- Coordinating w/ Other Departments

Project Priority

- Budget processes
- Develop x-cutting goals and metrics
- Dedicated, flexible funding
- Clarifying DOT authority over transit

Policies

- State-specific design guidance
- Support across the department

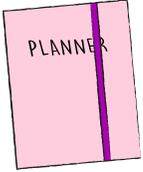
Public Engagement

- Public comment processes
- DOT engagement with local gov.
- Calls for proposals

People

- Champions for safety and mobility
- DOT staff long-standing and new

KEY OPPORTUNITIES



Planning

- **Advance Active Transportation Plans.** Active transportation plans are voluntarily in place or currently in process in all of the RE-AMP States, and advocates have been key in developing them and educating around them. As identified in our Kansas interview, these plans can help staff within the DOT to bring walking, biking, and rolling to the wider attention of the department and get the ball rolling on specific projects.
- **Leverage required planning processes,** like those for resilience, carbon reduction, highway safety, or long range transportation plans to get the ball rolling on specific projects, or bring attention on a specific issue to the whole department. In Iowa, for instance, the interview returned repeatedly to the importance of the long range transportation plan.
- **Increase awareness of other departments.** Other departments within the executive branch may have relevant goals or initiatives that the DOT is not advancing because of siloing or a lack of awareness. In Michigan, our advocate raised the MI Healthy Climate Plan, which sets a specific goal for clean transportation as an example. Despite MDOT's involvement in developing the goal, department leadership seemed unaware of it six months later, highlighting the importance of follow-up after plans are set.



Project Priority

- **Engage and make it easier to engage in budget processes.** Budget priorities can be set through quite different processes – internal, as in the case of the transportation commission in Iowa; or external, such as Wisconsin's legislature-set budget. Getting involved in the budget process to clarify the categories and ensure that what is prioritized in the budget reflects overall priorities for the system may be one of the most impactful reforms possible.
- **Advocate for dedicated, flexible funding.** In most states, different funding "buckets" each have different systems for determining what projects receive priority. Legislatures setting these funding "buckets" may try to strike a balance between dedicating funding to advance specific goals and giving state DOTs valuable flexibility to integrate funding streams into existing workflows. In Kansas, for instance, a small amount of flexible state funding, dedicated to active transportation, has had an outsized impact on their ability to advance active transportation in ways that are responsive to communities.
- **Develop cross-cutting goals and the metrics needed to achieve them.** While dedicated funding can be extremely valuable, siloes between funding "buckets" can make it hard to advance goals system wide. Advocates, legislatures, and DOTs are increasingly looking to develop goals and metrics

- **Develop cross-cutting goals (cont.)** that can be used as a factor in project selection and design for transportation projects regardless of funding streams. For instance, our advocate in Michigan pointed out that while money set aside for safety ensures that some number of safety projects are funded, to ensure that all road projects consider safety impacts, we need to develop overarching goals with specific quantitative metrics to back them up.
- **Clarify DOT authority and flexibility in advancing transit.** Because DOTs have direct ownership and jurisdiction over the primary highway system, and because transit is typically owned by local authorities, both advocates and DOT staff continue to have questions over what a state DOT's role can be in funding and promoting transit. For example, DOT staff in Indiana were unsure whether a project involving a bus stop was permitted with INDOT funding.



Policies

- **Advance state-specific multimodal design guidance.** Adopting state-specific guidance can be especially valuable for addressing unique safety scenarios and multi-modal road design. In Ohio, both DOT staff and advocates agreed that the adoption of the state's Multi-Modal Design Guide has been transformational.
- **Build support for new policies with staff from offices across the DOT.** Getting support across different offices and districts is especially important in decentralized departments. For instance in Minnesota, the state legislature and the DOT have introduced a number of strong policies to advance cleaner, safer, more accessible transportation systems – from a VMT reduction law to guidance on safe and complete streets. But their decentralized system leaves significant discretion to district engineers, who are the ones who will need to incorporate these policies into their day-to-day work and designs. Designing policies that integrate within existing workflows, and getting support for mobility priorities from beyond the central office may be key to durable implementation.

Public Engagement

- **Help coordinate public comment processes to give residents of all backgrounds a say.** Public comment processes in some states have undergone redesigns to better include a range of perspectives and priorities. But there are often gaps between intentions and impact. In Indiana, a state that in 2020 redesigned their public involvement process for project development, advocates were impressed by INDOT's process for responding to every comment that comes in and recent use of Planning and Environmental Linkage studies, which have provided expanded opportunities for public comment on major infrastructure projects. However, they emphasized the value of continuing to strengthen early coordination with local, on-the-ground partners.



- **Encourage deep DOT engagement with local governments.** DOTs may engage local governments as a stakeholder throughout the development of a road project, which can take 8–10 years, and may develop deep ongoing relationships with local governments. These relationships can help move local priorities for increased mobility up the chain, and may also help DOTs bring their vision for safety and fix-it-first to local communities. In North Dakota, the DOT described how they’d met community requests for improvements like road diets – a push from communities up to the DOT that our advocate described as “capillary action.”
- **Make the most of DOT calls for local proposals.** DOTs can offer calls for project proposals from local governments, whether for special funding opportunities (as in Ohio) or as a part of the standard funding process (in Michigan). These may be a valuable opportunity for communities looking to demonstrate and fund their own priorities.



People

- **Find safety and mobility champions within DOTs.** Champions for safety and mobility within DOTs are key to make sure new plans and policies get implemented. They are also necessary to make the case for these projects and priorities, both within the DOT and to the legislature or public at large. In South Dakota, for instance, public engagement meetings provided an opportunity for safety champions within the DOT to explain new elements of the safe systems approach. In Kansas, our advocate expressed appreciation for active transportation staff who were so “willing to act as champions, even beyond what they’re able to do” within their own state DOT.
- **Build relationships with new and long-time DOT staff.** Seeing the people in the systems helps us see the possibility for change. In DOTs, we see long-time public servants with critical institutional knowledge and we are starting to see a new generation of leaders emerge with fresh ideas and backgrounds often more focused on urban planning, bike/ped, or safe systems. In Illinois, advocates identified the new commissioner as an excellent example of this opportunity.

With those key themes in mind, the following pages present edited selections from conversations with the DOT in each of our 10 RE-AMP states.

Now let’s take a deeper dive into each state DOT.

Want to skip straight to your state? Click here: [IL](#) | [IN](#) | [IA](#) | [KS](#) | [MI](#) | [MN](#) | [ND](#) | [OH](#) | [SD](#) | [WI](#)

State By State: In Conversation

Advocates and DOT staff joined in conversation to discuss their perspectives on opportunities to make transportation safer, cleaner, and more accessible. Excerpts from their conversations are presented below. We have tried to retain the original phrasing to the maximum extent possible, but have edited for length and clarity. Each state's write-up includes a brief post-interview reflection from advocates.

Illinois (IDOT)

We were unfortunately unable to find time to sit down for an interview during this project timeline. We are instead drawing on an interview with Secretary of Transportation Gia Biagi, conducted by IDOT Bureau Chief of Communications Bree Hankins. In his reflection, Dany Robles (Illinois Environmental Council) also draws on ongoing conversations they are having with IDOT.

We talk a lot about highway projects, but we do a lot more than that at IDOT. What kinds of work would you like the public to be more aware of? You do see our large highway projects. But even on highway projects, there are nuances and things we're doing that are very innovative. Things like our double diamond interchanges, our roundabouts, those are real innovations for both safety and fluid movements. Then there are also smaller projects like in Taylorville, where we have a pedestrian bike bridge that was really 10 years of effort of communities across that area pushing on that project to get it done. We operate at all these different levels, from making sure we get snow off the roads and potholes are filled, to these large scale projects.

You've been traveling all over the state and listening to IDOT employees. Is there anything you heard that surprised you or you thought you could make an immediate impact on? I have to thank everyone for their candor. There's so much love for this organization. IDOT is a long-standing institution, and it's a place where you can make a life. Another piece that came across is people's enthusiasm for getting work done and removing the obstacles to it. On that side, I definitely heard some of the challenges. We need more people in the seats, and that's a fact, and we're working on it. We have some good challenges, like a whole lot of money in our capital program and a whole lot of projects, but there are things we need to be able to do to deliver on that capacity. We can wish we had done those things 10 years ago, but the moment is now, and we have to catch up and make it possible for people to deliver.

What would you tell prospective applicants about working for IDOT? It's a place where you can start here and stay for a lifetime if you want to. You know, I've been in and out of government, I've worked in the private sector. I'll tell you: everyone should work in government, even if it's a short tour of duty. You should get a feel for what it

means to deliver for the community you live in. And to get a little bit of empathy for the rules and procedures we have to navigate. We didn't make those up. They are there because that's what the public said they wanted. Those are our checks and balances. Are there ways to streamline those? I'm absolutely interested, and we're working on that.

Looking ahead to 2026 and beyond, what are you most excited about? Mostly about getting shovels in the ground. We're really focused on a couple of areas, and two of them are Speed and Spend. How do we speed up our processes? How do we spend down our capital dollars to make sure we can make the next ask? But also ways we can be strategic. I was lucky enough to step in with a Blue Ribbon Commission that has been looking at IDOT, around product delivery, governance, capacity, equity, and sustainability. We embraced it. I'm really excited to transform that body of work, which will be a report, into benchmarks and metrics and ways we can really track our success.

Can you talk a little bit about the significance of Rebuild Illinois and what you think the legacy of that will be? Rebuild Illinois was a sea change. It was roughly \$45B of capital funding, mostly for transportation, passed in 2019. Never has there been this amount of funding in the history of the state of Illinois. You're seeing shovels in the ground in every county, projects that have been on the books for a decade actually move forward. Thanks to the general assembly and the governor, we had \$400M go out to localities directly for local projects. It's given us the flexibility for folks to do smaller scale projects, and move the needle on big ones that have been waiting for funding. Anything we've been doing that streamlines that, that moves things a little faster, that makes roadways a little safer, that gives localities a chance to influence what their main street looks like, all of those things have long term impacts. IDOT makes lives better with every good choice we make on how we spend those dollars.

Reflection from our advocate: With the state DOT and our current administration, it does feel like they are listening to advocates' voices and are with us on the priorities. Having a close relationship with the Governor's climate advisor for the last 2 years is helping us pull our priorities forward, but in an unwieldy bureaucracy like the DOT it's hard to completely steer the ship in a new direction. Now there's a new captain of the ship, Sec. Biagi, but it's still hard to totally change direction. We're trying to learn from her what the reality is of what's at play within the agency with project implementation, delivery, and staff retention. Advocates from our coalition were involved in the blue ribbon commission process, and we're now trying to take those findings and apply them to reprioritize project delivery to really meet our climate goals. The DOT has a direct role in coordinating the Northern Illinois Transit Authority after the passage of SB2111. We're getting to the point where there's a lot of reenvisioning of leadership, and that's having an effect on what people see as possible on the ground.

Indiana (INDOT)

Ashlyn Devine and Taylor Firestine (Health by Design) sat down for a candid conversation with staff from the INDOT Division of Traffic Safety.

How are complete streets projects treated by INDOT? Has the policy been operationalized? There are roadblocks to promoting sidewalks. For instance, INDOT staff discussed a project that would have included bus stop infrastructure, but some internal staff were concerned that this was not permitted on an INDOT funded project. The state's complete streets policy has not been operationalized or revised to keep pace with evolving best practices. However, staff typically have success when framing these projects as safety focused.

What's the relationship between statewide and local priorities for INDOT? The Central Office sets policies and manages assets and funding. District offices request funding while the Central Office makes final decisions. Districts know more about local context; Central holds the funds. Due to the state's funding formula (allocated on centerline miles, regardless of number of lanes), more populous jurisdictions receive less per capita funding relative to smaller jurisdictions with less population and traffic. On a per centerline mile basis, state-controlled routes receive an unequal share of funding, compared to local communities. There is some maintenance money to make small repairs to smaller roads, but much of the budget is being pulled toward the interstate repairs as the interstate highway system reaches the end of its useful life and requires major upgrades to remain operational.

What role does public engagement play in INDOT decisions? The Offices of Traffic Safety and Mobility are smaller departments but make up most of the projects that receive public engagement, due to their high visibility and less routine nature. INDOT works with individual local stakeholders (i.e., Mayor, chief engineer, etc.) to get them involved at the earliest possible stage of a project – during the scoping phase. Once the scope is confirmed, the design phase includes public meetings, hearings, opportunities for public comment, etc. Changes sometimes result from this process but sometimes comments must be ignored. In recent years, INDOT has invested in Planning and Environmental Linkage (PEL) studies, which invite members of the public and community stakeholders to the table early and often, resulting in more context-sensitive design outcomes for major infrastructure projects. Among the hundreds received annually, all complaints formally submitted to INDOT receive a thorough review and response.

How does INDOT approach funding multimodal transportation? INDOT is more supportive of broad funding programs, which offer project and funding allocation

flexibility. If an incentive requires a new position, like Safe Routes to School coordinator, it likely won't be taken up.

Do you think that INDOT has been changing?

Generational shifts are clear. There seems to be a growing culture of prioritizing safety and vulnerable road users, particularly among younger staff.

Reflection from our advocates: It was interesting being from a younger generation and hearing from folks in the same age cohort talking about this century-old, seemingly unmovable agency. Hearing their own recognition that there was a need for more cooperation and collaboration with organizations doing on the ground community work, and room for improvement. Their honesty about complete streets was eye-opening: how much is policy really being integrated into staff decision making? Transportation is so much more than moving cars and freight... thinking about how entrenched sentiment and funding barriers relate to one another and can reinforce each other. But it feels like opportunities with INDOT are bubbling up, even in a short period of time. We're hoping to make the connections between mobility, safety and public health more explicit for INDOT and champion voices already pushing in the agency. We're hoping to figure out a clever way to integrate "do-gooder" policies like Complete Streets into existing project scoping, tweaking existing questions rather than making it feel like added or duplicative work. And we are feeling optimistic, at least about working and building relationships around traffic safety.



From INDOT's [Revive I-70](#) Materials



INDOT's [SafeZones](#) Pilot (INDOT Facebook 2024)



Graphic of INDOT's 2019 [Active Transportation Plan](#)

Iowa (Iowa DOT)

An interview between Kari Carney (1K Friends of Iowa) and Stuart Anderson, director of Iowa DOT's Planning, Programming and Modal Division clarified the DOT's planning and budgeting processes; the role of the Transportation Commission; department culture; and transportation changes across Iowa.

Why do you think people come to work at the Iowa DOT?

We actually have monthly new employee orientation sessions and at each one Scott Marler, our director, comes and asks every person to introduce themselves and explain why they came to work at the DOT. We also have quarterly celebrations for people that have 20 plus years of service at the DOT, and when they come up and get their certificate and medal, Scott asks them "what's kept you at the DOT this long?" We hear a lot about good benefits. There's still a really good pension for an employee of the state of Iowa, good work life balance. We work hard at the DOT, but we also recognize that it's a 40 hour a week job. The other common theme that we hear a lot is really a passion for public service. I grew up with an uncle that worked at the DOT for 40+ years and so I always heard him talk about stories of projects he was working on, getting the Interstate built. I always loved hearing those stories and admired the impact he had on us, as we're traveling across the state to see family and have access to education and recreation, etc. I think that's a pretty common theme for a lot of state employees – you know you can really see the benefits to the public.

Could you describe the structure of the department? What autonomy do different offices have? We pride ourselves on not being a siloed structure within the department. Certainly within the last 10 years, it's been a key point – the need to be working from our same page of priorities and goals and objectives. Of course, we benefit from having a state long-range transportation plan that tells us the direction we need to go. We also have a strategic business plan which gives us direction.

Who develops the criteria for the statewide transportation improvement plan? How do you decide which projects go into it? The most consequential program for investments on the DOT-owned system is our five year transportation improvement program. That is actually the responsibility of the IA Transportation Commission. The Commission develops program objectives and votes on them. They say we want to increase the amount dedicated for pavement rehab or the amount dedicated for safety.

How is the Vulnerable Road User Safety Assessment, a federally required safety assessment, having an impact? Was there a reason the state did not adopt the Vision Zero plan? Our Traffic Operations Safety Bureau led the VRUSA effort. The Commission set aside a certain amount of money in each year of the program for

dedicated safety projects. My guess is the safety bureau is utilizing that tool to identify some of those safety projects. We were a part of a campaign toward zero deaths for quite a few years. I know a challenge with that has been the realistic nature of those marketing campaigns. Certainly that is the dream of everybody involved in highway design and implementation, that you have no preventable deaths, but the challenge is how you can make meaningful progress.

Do you think transportation in Iowa is changing and do you think it should change?

Transportation in Iowa is changing. A great value of the long range transportation plan is that it looks out 20+ years into the future, and how we think demographics are changing and what new technology is going to happen. And then, how should we adapt our investments to meet those changing needs over time? Iowa has for many years been seeing an aging population, and I think that's led to some of the decision making we've made on safety. Of course the transformational change that could be coming, and I think will be coming but will take some time, is increasing automated transportation components. There certainly are changes coming and I think through a long range planning process we have a built in a timeline and process for making sure we're adapting to those changes.

Reflection from our advocate: The commission, which sets the priorities, has quietly moved towards "fix it first" through their budget process. The biggest barriers right now are the cities and communities that still think the old way. I wonder what the DOT is doing to bring communities along to get communities to go along with fixing roads rather than expansion. We talked a lot about safety. It's an opportunity and a challenge that Iowa is one of the safest states for road safety. There's a high percentage of stuff they've already done safety improvements on, for example with rumble strips on the highway. But we know that there's an awful lot Iowa gets wrong, and Iowa can still be better.



A 3-lane road in Atlantic, IA, from Iowa DOT's "Highway Safety Features" explainer of 4- to 3-lane conversions.

Kansas (KDOT)

Michael Kelley (BikeWalkKC) interviewed staff from KDOT's Multimodal Transportation and Innovation Division: Matt Messina (Director of Multimodal Transportation), Jenny Kramer (Active Transportation Manager), and Cory Davis (Director of Multimodal Transportation and Innovation). They highlighted the changing dynamics between the multimodal office and other divisions, between cities and KDOT, and the impact that a small amount of dedicated state funding has had on active transportation in the state in recent years.

Why did each of you come to work at KDOT? Matt was looking for a 100% ped-bike related job. Jenny had worked at the Kansas Department of Health and Environment and had done work focusing on increasing walking and biking as a way to increase physical activity, working closely with the Safe Routes to School coordinator for years. The bike-ped coordinator role was literally her dream job, being able to move from a position that was more planning and coalition management to one that was making concrete changes for walking and biking. Cory reflected that at the beginning of his career, he saw that transportation was a part of everything. Everything we need daily is going to involve some sort of transportation. Their team impacts the lives of Kansans every day in numerous ways, and that impact is what made KDOT attractive.

How is the DOT organized? How are central office policies implemented by District engineers? We have a centralized version of a DOT, even with our Districts. We're organized so that we can communicate with other groups, divisions, and bureaus as needed to make progress on a project. Headquarters staff works in partnership alongside everyone across the state, working through whatever workflow is going to have an impact on how a district handles a project. With the state revisions of the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD), the Research Bureau makes sure that any policies in place reference the new MUTCD and are representative of what's been altered. In the multimodal office, we coordinate with Districts on just about everything, but the money and programs that the multimodal division handles are usually distributed through local, off-system projects that aren't always on a highway, and then the responsible party is the city or county. We loop in District staff so they know what's going on, but we don't work with District staff closely unless there is system overlap.

How does KDOT compare its work to what's being done in other states? Kansas has actually been a state called upon to share what we're doing as a model. We have surrounding states in friendly or unintentional competition. We have Missouri reaching out all the time, asking if KDOT can talk to their group and tell them how to do it. For

transit and rail, we know not every state provides state funds for additional aid, and we're very grateful that Kansas does. For active transportation, we get a large amount of federal funds, but you can't be as quick or responsive with that as we'd prefer it to be. Our state funds allow for that.

What has been the impact of the updated Statewide Active Transportation Plan?

A lot of changes started with the \$2 million in multimodal funding earmarked for active transportation that was allocated in the IKE [Eisenhower Legacy Transportation] program, outlined by the legislature in 2018-19. \$2 million may seem like a little, but it helped us think about implementing our vision for the program, starting with the Active Transportation plan. That helped us get awareness within KDOT and outside of KDOT, and identify what our priorities are – like revamping Safe Routes to School, which is now going gangbusters. It helped get people excited statewide about active transportation again. There had been a lot of efforts in the public health realm around walking and biking for almost 10 years, and that started to dwindle, so this got it back up again. It's hard to know where the snowball started to take effect: we had the governor, the administration, a new secretary, the funding, new staff at KDOT. There's been a very strong move towards integrating active transportation facilities and projects into other KDOT projects. Not that long ago, two or three years ago, if there was anything related to walking or biking mentioned in a KDOT project, staff would want to invite members of the multimodal team to consult, saying oh that's not our area. It still happens, but not as much. And it used to be so common that communities would reach out 5 days before a project let their contracts, saying they wanted a sidewalk along the bridge or road – but there was nothing to be done. So we thought, we need to find out about these earlier on and get in during the survey period. That has kind of happened organically. It's a lot different with the people who work at KDOT now vs. 10 years ago.

Reflection from our advocate: In many states, not just Kansas, the health agency tends to be more forward thinking about the benefits of walking and biking, but struggle to get DOTs to buy into that element. Kansas is demonstrably further along with active transportation than some other states, but it doesn't mean they're a trailblazer doing everything they should be. There still can be frustration with how they listen to communities – including projects where local agencies conducted a corridor study and plan for safety improvements but received pushback from KDOT on implementation. But one thing the interview reinforced was how much the champions inside KDOT are willing to act as champions, even beyond what they're able to do within KDOT. They show up at meetings, make connections, and give presentations. It was encouraging to hear they see a positive relationship between KDOT and the legislature, and that has me thinking about getting face time with the policy office to see what their priorities are. If we had a statewide coalition, there may also be an opportunity to get time with District engineers from across the state, so they're more aware of local need for multimodal work.

Michigan (MDOT)

In a series of in-depth conversations over fall and winter of 2024, between Megan Owens (Transportation Riders United), other Michigan advocates, and staff from MDOT including Matt Gilbraith (Planning Manager, Metro Region), James VanSteel (Transportation Planner, Metro Region), John Martin (Statewide Complete Streets Coordinator) and Jim Ashman (Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Program Coordinator), staff at MDOT helped illuminate some of the wonkier details of project selection and reflected on department priorities. Note that unlike most other interviews, this is drawn from conversations that had already taken place before this research project began.

What is the process for how projects are chosen to be prioritized to receive federal funding? Different transportation funding programs have different goals [that determine what's prioritized]. There are required performance measures, but the main programs (pavement, operations, traffic + safety, etc.) each have different metrics and goals. On the highway side of it, pavement quality is the primary measure, based on a statewide goal from the mid-1990s. Remaining service life of the pavement is the primary metric.

Are there any broad themes across the state? A shift at MDOT has been towards more local input for safety, streetscaping, etc. early in the Capital Preventive Maintenance (CPM) process. Pavement quality is still the core, but these elements are being discussed earlier on, before formal designs are developed

When Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) federal formula funding comes to the state, what determines how it gets used? Initially, there are set-asides for maintenance and annual operations budgets. Once set-asides are paid, remaining funds are split 50/50 between MDOT and MPOs that are in counties eligible because of air quality non-attainment or other standards. When it comes to transit, because of Michigan's Public Act 51 (PA 51) – which determines the split between state and municipal funding – MDOT is limited in what they can invest from their own funding directly into transit, because it would become "local," not "state" funds and shift proportion required by PA 51.

How is Complete Streets or multimodal treated? Complete Streets and multimodal projects don't have a specific funding source. MDOT does the best we can within the existing budget, stretching the dollars, and relying on the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) within the existing budget. We're developing new guidance, and our projects are based very much on community projects and seeking economies of scale. Often we see adjoining communities seeking grants and combining their funds for matching, some municipalities have floated bonds and funded it themselves. A new federal requirement ties the Safe Systems Approach to complete streets, meaning that a high crash rate or vulnerable road users increases project priority.

How do different plans and programs, like the 5-Year Program and the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program, relate? It can be hard to determine the connectivity between service life, safety, opportunities for transit, etc. They're very siloed off.

Reflection from our advocate: When my organization started, even before I joined, we used to see the DOT as a major opponent, pushing through highway expansions and ignoring transit or rail as an alternative. They're doing better engagement now, and making multimodal plans, but those plans aren't generally getting implemented yet. There are also communications challenges within the DOT, and with departments doing related things. One example of that: MDOT was on the Governor's Healthy Climate Plan Task Force, which said that Michigan had to expand clean transportation by 15% a year. Six months later, the director of MDOT wasn't familiar with that goal. Beyond the language of the plans and goals and vision, the real question needs to be: What are the decision-making factors that determine what projects get built? For MDOT's biggest pots of money, as determined by the federal and state legislature, the main factors considered are still Level of Service (traffic flow) and pavement condition. Michigan's Governor has switched parties three times in the last 15 years, but DOT policies and priorities have barely changed. That's not because there aren't problems – the current governor ran on a platform of "Fix the Damn Roads" – but MDOT's complexity, road-building industry pressure, and auto-centric state leadership have prevented meaningful change. There's an opportunity to get different parts of MDOT coordinating more (like the Office of Rail, which controls passenger rail, and the Office of Passenger Transportation). We also need to shift the underlying criteria in order to link projects with meaningful priorities like public health, climate, affordability, and accessibility. There are examples we can look to from other states, like Virginia DOT's SMART SCALE program, SHIFT in Kentucky, or states integrating climate into decision making, like in Minnesota and Colorado.



Local and state officials marking the reconstruction and widening of a bridge over I-96, along with a new nonmotorized path with trail connections.



The CN crossing at M-85, part of an M-85 Railroad Crossing Study.

Minnesota (MnDOT)

In Michael Wojcik's (BikeMN) informal sit down with Brian Sorenson (Director of the Office of Traffic Engineering), the conversation highlighted department culture and the way new policies get taken up.

What do you think makes MnDOT special or unique? MnDOT is a collaborative culture. Departments of Transportation do have bureaucracy, so change does take time. In particular, things take more time at MnDOT because it's a collaborative culture, and people at all levels are involved.

What autonomy does each office have within MnDOT?

Decisions are made at the District level, but sometimes may involve the central office. MnDOT is not a top down type of organization – District engineers often have the ability to make final decisions. Transportation Engineering tends to be a risk averse culture.

How do the central office policies get taken up by district engineers? The MnDOT central office maintains policies that districts need to follow, and develops guidance to help the districts evolve and adapt. For a policy to be effective, the day-to-day workers need to be on board. It's difficult to write policy in enough detail to direct effective, consistent change in a decentralized organization as big as MnDOT. The other challenge with policy is that it often needs to change and evolve, and if it doesn't, it actually can prevent the type of change needed to carry out intent. The more policy we have, the more time we would spend reviewing and updating all of our policies.

How do policies get put in place? Policies may come from different places. The Safe System Approach Implementation Plan, for instance, was put in place with the input of MnDOT staff at all levels, and recommended evaluating policy for alignment with the Safe Systems Approach. The 2023 law setting out vehicle miles traveled (VMT) reduction was passed by the legislature, and would have taken a long time to put in place within the DOT. The primary seatbelt and hands free laws, where engineers knew for 30 years that these safety measures were needed, still took a long time to gain political support.

Reflection from our advocate: I have been in the thick of it with the Department of Transportation for 2 years in this position, really 15 years total. I got more insights than I would have expected from this single nebulous, informal conversation. What struck me most was how thoughtful Brian was being, trying to navigate the changes we want to see through the culture of the department. MnDOT is the size of some small states' entire budget. Some of their policies are fantastic, like the Safe Systems Approach manual. But the policy isn't happening in practice, engineers are not accountable. The most effective solution will probably be time. Engineers are now aware of the policies. I am really impressed with staff who are working to get the policies implemented.

North Dakota (NDDOT)

In response to a written survey from Justin Kristan (BikeWalkND), a planner and an engineer from NDDOT helped paint a picture of small changes for active transportation, accomplished at multiple levels, especially through cities and local road authorities.

How is NDDOT policy developed? Policy is developed within an area division, with department-wide comments. Policies are developed by NDDOT management, in consideration of the various plans and input from stakeholders.

How much discretion do district road engineers have on project design? What influence do district engineers have vs. the home office in Bismarck?

Scoping decisions are made at the NDDOT management level balancing many competing priorities.

ND Moves, the state DOT's active and public transportation plan, was adopted in 2019. What elements of ND Moves have been implemented since then?

Elements that have been implemented include internal and external working groups, beginning to designate the US Bike Network, and mapping active transportation network gaps along state roadways in urban areas. The plan was presented to engineers at the Transportation Conference.

Do you feel NDDOT's roadway design approach is growing in sensitivity to active transportation? Have towns desired traffic calming on state highways?

Yes, there have been many projects where traffic calming is regularly considered as an option to reduce speed in areas. Many projects include sidewalks and bike paths. NDDOT has been meeting the desire for traffic calming, typically based on city comments. "If a road project goes through a town, the NDDOT largely defers to the local authority for sidewalk and ADA ramp improvements adjacent to the roadway. Examples include traffic calming, sidewalk bulb outs and new pedestrian crossings in Mandan, Bismarck, Jamestown, and New Town.

Reflection from our advocate: I've been working with the DOT, on and off, for 10 years. There's capillary action: it's moving up. There are little pockets thinking about walking and biking whether that's Cavalier, whose downtown is connected by a shared use path to Icelandic State Park, or organizations like Folkways, who work on social connection in Fargo and run community events like the Red River Farmers Market. I think there's an opportunity to take the ND active transportation plan, which should be coming up for renewal, and staying close to NDDOT with that. We can also continue to open conversations with communities, and share what they want for active transportation planning and programming, for what they're energized on, and how they've worked with the DOT. I think the DOT is open to listening.

Ohio (ODOT)

In Jenna Thomas's (BikeCleveland) interview with Randy Lane (ODOT statewide planning manager), the conversation focused on ODOT's de-centralized organizational structure and how funding is allocated.

How is ODOT organized? What is the relationship between central and district offices? There's coordination at the central office and district level in the project development process. Each district office (12 statewide) administers and oversees project development (engineering, planning, environmental, etc.) Depending on the function, district offices are sometimes autonomous – day-to-day work is autonomous in those business units. Some states are not de-centralized, but this offers us a much more efficient process.

How are road designs and exemptions in unique scenarios determined? What has been the impact of new guidance documents? The adoption of the Ohio Multi-Modal Design Guide has been transformational in how district offices and local project sponsors can approach multi-modal & safety-specific projects. Before, it was hard to consider unique safety scenarios and different bike facility types, but this resource has offered a lot more clarity.

What are some of the main considerations in developing the long range or project plans? There are many different assets, so whether it's the level of service (LOS) of assets, types of assets, urban & rural, different districts have different things they should consider when dealing with projects. They refer to the same core policies and guides, and also use judgement through the design & engineering process. For example, in rural districts like Appalachia, they're managing a lot of 2-lane road facilities that have higher speeds, and also some main street type communities. In certain districts, where the system is of a more urban characteristic, the challenges and opportunities are different so there is a difference in judgement and thinking. Ultimately, the goal is to achieve consistency from district to district through the process, but characteristics get weighed differently. There's not much room for a radical approach.

In the fall of 2024, ODOT issued a special solicitation for active transportation funding. How did that special solicitation work? The funding was a special initiative, because it was outside of the standard transportation alternatives application process. The last federal transportation funding bill, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, had a 50% increase in Transportation Alternatives (TA) program dollars, so this special solicitation was an effort to get dollars to good projects quicker. The Office of Local Programs was involved early on to help set up the goals of the program.

Reflection from our advocate: One thing that was helpful was that staff pointed to a lot of resources. The number of policy documents was almost comical, representing both federal funding and state funding and project development processes. I can't imagine being a project manager new to the job and learning all the different policies, but he seemed to know everything in and out. A lot of it seems transparent – you can find it all on the website. They're undergoing a robust community engagement process for their long range transportation plan update. I've been somewhat surprised by how much bike/ped/safety conversations are coming out of that, although I'm not sure it will translate to project implementation. The IIJA changed a lot of things, and with a new federal transportation bill on the horizon, they're wondering what comes next. I'd also like to dig more into the legislative piece, because the state legislature seems to determine ODOT's flexibility for transit, and figure out how much flexibility other states give their DOTs.



ODOT's 2025 Ohio Active Transportation Conference



ODOT District 6 July 2025 Chip Seal



Cincinnati Bell Connector Streetcar, from ODOT's 2022 Rail Transit State Safety Oversight Program Report



Ohio Department of Transportation booth at the 2024 Ohio State Fair.

South Dakota (SDDOT)

In public meetings during the process of developing the Statewide Transportation Improvement Plan in 2022 and 2023, Michael Behm (SDDOT Director of Planning and Engineering) answered in-depth questions from residents. We were unfortunately unable to find time to sit down personally during this project timeline and are drawing on recordings of those conversations instead.

How can you help with the signage or other improvements for bike routes and walking on highways? One thing we're looking at doing is getting more of a plan developed for pedestrian and bicycle use in South Dakota, for what that could look like. So, as we start rolling that out we definitely want to get input and thoughts from the users of those facilities of what could work here.

Who controls signal and traffic light timing? In our larger communities, usually there's an agreement in place for who takes over and who has responsibility for signal timings, even on state highways. Three or four years ago, we were working through some accessibility and ped-push button things on one corridor to help to optimize some of that signal timing. We can definitely sit down to visit about what the agreement says, who does what, and how they can be timed. We should have access to an agreement that we can share with you and make sure we're on the same page.

How does collaboration go with cities? Any transportation project we have out there, the key is that a lot of the time this is the lifeblood of their communities. Especially for some of our smaller communities, there's one state highway that comes through their town, and that's the lifeblood. So when the projects start, the ideas start, it's not that we approach the city for the first time and talk about transportation. Our area staff has relationships built with city staff over time, and we're monitoring issues through town, and as those lines come up we'll share that we might be looking at reconstruction in 8-10 years, or whatever the time frame is.

Regarding a 4-lane to 3-lane conversion in Wagner, why is this design moving forward? Could sidewalks go on one side instead of both sides? Why not keep the four lanes? Pedestrians, especially in urban areas, are on both sides of the road. Our intent is to have a 14-foot outside lane instead of the 12-foot we have today, so as folks move through town is there a potential to be slowed up by a large vehicle? Yes, but the same potential exists today. We're trying to fit a section in there that's going to fit in Wagner from a safety and operational perspective, with a 3-lane section. We're trying to get the best system possible through town, and the data is showing us the 3-lanes should be there. It's not that it couldn't be 4-lanes in a different town, or anything along those lines. We try and fit what's best based on the traffic, the pedestrian use, the

crossings, how close properties are adjacent to it – that’s where the data is showing us the project needs to go.

How does vehicle autonomy relate to Towards Zero Deaths and all those things?

Side note: you’ve got to do more education on diverging diamonds. I don’t think a lot of people know what the heck you’re supposed to do running perpendicular to a diverging diamond (me included). Driver education is very important. Just a few years ago we added roundabouts to the driver’s manual – you point out we need to add diverging diamonds to it, and I don’t think we’ve got that one in there, because I don’t think we had any when we last reviewed [the manual]. How can we go about educating folks on new designs and new technology? We don’t always have the right answers. We don’t know who’s going to drive through the intersection. So what we’ve done is to try and make it as intuitive as possible. We’ve also put maps out and let people walk through it, and we also went to talk with people, too. If you have other ideas about how to educate people, we’re all ears. It goes back to what we call the swiss cheese analogy. If you gotta get something through the cheese and the holes line up perfectly, then a crash can happen. But if you eat swiss cheese, you know the holes don’t usually line up perfectly. So the theory is that with multiple layers of different protections, one of these things is going to help prevent a crash. Whether it’s the in-slope, the guardrail, maybe some of the autonomy-level things, reducing decision points – and that’s what we’re considering a Safe Systems Approach. So when we’re entering an area, we’re thinking, what can we do to help in that area so there aren’t as many decisions? It’s just trying to reduce the potential, using that swiss cheese analogy, but yeah – people have got to know how to do it too, so I really appreciate the comments.



Reflection from our researcher: It was great to see how much attention SDDOT is paying to safety, especially their focus on passive elements and how they explain that to the public. It was striking how at the end of every meeting, the director of planning closes with, “I’d be remiss if I didn’t say, buckle up on your way home, put your phones away, don’t stop and have a beer, just get where you need to go and get there safely. It’s not just you using those roads, it’s other families too.” It was also clear that SDDOT takes pride in the relationships they’ve built with local leaders at the county and city level. The state, especially the major metro areas, are growing in population, and you do hear communities express desire for road expansion – at the same time, growth could mean transit and multi-modal systems may start to be seen as more feasible. As unique as South Dakota is, you’re seeing a lot of the same trends there as in other states, although still limited in some ways. If folks on the ground have a vision around state roads, whether that’s safety or bike-ped, there are clear opportunities to partner with SDDOT. Including through their new Active Transportation Plan, which is near publication.

Wisconsin (WisDOT)

Raphie Torralba's (1000 Friends Wisconsin) conversation with Andrew Levy (WisDOT Southeast Regional Planning Supervisor) and Alena DeGrado (WisDOT Bike/Ped Coordinator) helped fill in more details on the challenges and opportunities of promoting bike/ped improvements and a slow transition from traditional asset management to more holistic traffic and safety metrics, internal DOT dynamics, and navigating the DOT's relationship with legislature, cities, and communities.

Briefly, what are the schools of thought on approaches to transportation planning?

There are different approaches. The big question is: how to be more proactive [in planning] rather than reactive.

Is there a dominant approach? Pavement condition is a huge part of most projects. For engineers who are at the top, that's their interest. Everything else comes after. We're pushing to get more performance measures for bike/ped, and creating more tools for multimodal infrastructure, including tracking urban indicators and scoring. Setting policy in the central office can be a hierarchical process, but there are opportunities to influence it if you are assertive.

Where in your work do you see an appetite for change, if any? The current administration has a huge focus on safety. They're still using a traditional approach, but slow evolution is occurring. There's an appetite for the justification of changes. Changes always should target a problem. The safe systems approach is fairly new, and there's been some more movement. There are many approaches, and the approach taken can depend on community interest and what they're looking for in individual projects. Staff receive continuing education and professional development in new innovations and approaches to planning, but a lot of the current planning priorities focus on asset management first.

Is your work tapped into local policies like the Milwaukee Vision Zero policy?

We are aware of the Milwaukee Vision Zero policy – this is the city's work on roadways they control. The state justification process has to rely on proven research, and there's a threshold that some of the vision zero policy doesn't reach. The threshold we're referring to is WisDOT's safety certification process, which standardizes how WisDOT evaluates safety improvement projects. Where we have crash history on a project corridor, we evaluate potential countermeasures that could mitigate the safety issues. WisDOT relies on a list of proven Crash Modification Factors (CMFs) to make safety improvements. The CMFs in the approved list at WisDOT have to meet a certain caliber of research quality, so there may be discrepancies in the recommendations or types of counter measures included in the Vision Zero Plans [in the city of Milwaukee and Milwaukee County, for example].

What constraints, if any, does the legislature place on WisDOT?

The biggest restriction from the legislature is funding, which is highway-focused and comes with strict rules for the budget. For example, there are requirements for how much money can be allocated for concrete vs. signal equipment.

Reflection from our advocate: The staff helped clarify who is in charge of public engagement and the role of public affairs and communications. The engagement process is typically managed by a separate group of people who are not necessarily involved in the plans – and it can be inconsistent what public involvement really looks like project to project. For example, whether residents are being engaged, who's in the room, and other things can change from one project to another. In one recent case the regional planning manager found out about a public engagement event the same week it was happening. So I'm hoping to find more opportunities to do community engagement and advocacy so that more leaders at the community level are aware of what's missing in WisDOT's current engagement and planning processes. Reflecting more on the conversation, it feels there is movement amongst some regional staff with regard to consideration for different metrics, in accord with asset management goals. However, the central office will have to make significant changes to statewide policies and standards so that systems or workflows can be approved to support implementation of collecting data on new metrics. In general, though, WisDOT is slow to adopt standards that are already being explored by the regional teams and local planners. For example, municipal planners may be looking to use CMFs that are not on WisDOT's approved list in implementing their Vision Zero strategies. At the same time a WisDOT project, maybe two blocks over, would not be able to use those same CMFs. It's maybe an oversimplification of the work that planners do, but this discrepancy still makes me ask the question: Fundamentally, what is the difference? So, as I work with more community members and potential leaders, we'll want to find ways to show greater support for the adoption of more holistic performance measurements and innovative safety improvement strategies, learn more about how this 'threshold' is determined, and potentially advocate for more research on CMFs not yet on WisDOTs 'approved' list.



WisDOT [highway safety education](#)



From WisDOT's 2025 [Year in Review](#)



[New roundabouts](#) on the WIS54 project in Outagamie County

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[US DOT Climate Strategies that Work](#): A comprehensive playbook put out in Dec. 2024 by the U.S. Department of Transportation's Climate Change Center, this guide makes the case for 27 strategies for reducing transportation sector greenhouse gas emissions. It highlights the climate and co-benefits of each strategy, details some cost considerations, and most relevant to state DOT adoption – highlights case studies and funding opportunities.

[State Smart Transportation Initiative \(SSTI\) Innovative DOT Framework](#): This guide is made for State DOT staff and officials, highlighting best practices and emerging tools that DOTs can adopt to meet the real transportation needs of their constituents.

[SSTI Know Your State Dashboard](#): An easy-to-use tool, this dashboard allows the public to explore state-by-state data on transportation emissions, spending and revenue, and state of good repair.

[Transportation for America's "State DOTs, Explained"](#): An excellent starting point for advocates or community members who want to understand who State DOTs even are and what they do.

[Clean RIDES Network](#) – [State Solutions Paper](#): The Clean RIDES Network has brought together over 100 organizations from across the country, with an initial focus on seven states (Illinois, Minnesota, Michigan, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York and California). They are focusing on state-level change to improve the transportation system, through new legislation and action at the DOT level. Their "State Solutions Paper" makes the case for why state-level change is needed, and models the impact that their priority policies could have.

[RE-AMP Action Team VRUSA Report](#): A collaborative report from six RE-AMP members across seven different Midwestern states that explains the Vulnerable Road User Safety Assessment (VRUSA), a newly required document. The report presents a review of each state's VRUSA alongside recommendations and trends across states.

[RE-AMP Action Team "Flex Your Funding" Report](#) and **[Advocacy Toolkit](#)**: A collaboration between six RE-AMP members and the Shared Use Mobility Center, these resources help explain the federal funding that DOTs receive. They break down key programs and decision-makers, particularly highlighting the flexibility that DOTs have in allocating their formula funding and using their "flex" authority to move funds from different programs. As Congress prepares to reauthorize federal transportation funding, understanding the provisions of the 2021 infrastructure bill is critical.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Flex Funding Comparison \(Climate & Community Institute\)](#): To dive deeper into flex funding, this tool shows states' transfers between different federal programs for FY21-23.

[Connecting the DOTs \(Brookings\)](#): An in-depth report on state transportation planning, investment, and accountability. It especially helps explain how state transportation projects get prioritized and the relationship between state and local partners.

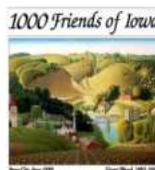
[Pew Roadway Maintenance Report](#): A Pew review of each state's Transportation Asset Management Plan (TAMP) across the country, looking at whether states are meeting their performance targets for road and bridge condition, and what funding or condition gaps they report.

[Transportation Governance and Finance \(AASHTO\)](#): This 50-state review from 2022, put together by the American Association for State Highway and Transportation Officials, dives deep on the relationship between state legislatures and state departments of transportation. This resource is perfect for anyone looking to dig into how flexibility, governance structure, and DOT revenue varies between states.

[RE-AMP State DOTs: Fast Facts](#) is this report's companion document, meant to give advocates key information to better understand their state DOTs.

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