



The National Beat

December 19, 2025

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USDOT Announces \$1.5 Billion BUILD Grant Opportunity for FY 2026

USDOT has issued the FY 2026 Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) for the Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (**BUILD**) program. This is one of the Department's long-standing discretionary grant programs supporting planning and capital investments with meaningful regional or local impact. Since its creation in 2009 (*and through multiple name changes from TIGER → BUILD → RAISE → BUILD...again*), the program has awarded more than \$18 billion across 18 rounds. The program is authorized under the IIJA and funds a broad range of highway, transit, rail, port, and multimodal projects. **Applications are due February 24, 2026 at 5:00 PM ET, with awards anticipated in late June, 2026.**

TL;DR: USDOT has released the FY 2026 BUILD NOFO with applications due Feb. 24, 2026. This round introduces changes: updated merit criteria focused more on core transportation outcomes, a new graded Benefit-Cost Analysis system, and a revised approach to Projects of Merit. Applicants should review changes closely.

FY 2026 Policy Direction and Merit Criteria

USDOT has updated the NOFO's merit criteria rating rubric to better align with administration priorities and executive orders. For the second-tier analysis, the **Senior Review Team (SRT)** will place heightened priority on projects that demonstrate exceptional benefits in four key areas:

1. **Safety**
2. **Quality of life**
3. **Mobility and community connectivity**
4. **Economic competitiveness and opportunity**

How the merit criteria work. Under statute, USDOT must evaluate all BUILD applications using eight merit criteria in Tier 1, resulting in a composite rating of Highly Recommended, Recommended, or Not Recommended. The four USDOT priority criteria serve as a secondary filter:

- **Highly Recommended** projects automatically advance to tier 2.
- **Recommended projects** advance only if they show strong benefits in one or more priority areas.

In effect, the eight statutory criteria are the scorecard for all applicants, while the four priority criteria act as "gatekeepers" to ensure that projects requiring discretionary review are those that best meet the Administration's priorities.

8 Statutory Merit Criteria

1. **Safety**
2. **Environmental sustainability**
3. **Quality of life**
4. **Mobility & community connectivity**
5. **Economic competitiveness and opportunity**
6. **State of good repair**
7. **Partnership & collaboration**
8. **Innovation**



Notable Shifts in Merit Criteria Themes

USDOT's updates signal several shifts in how the department is weighing outcomes:

Merit Criterion	Primary Focus in FY25	Primary Focus in FY26	Thematic Policy Shift
Safety	Reducing fatalities and serious injuries; protecting non-motorized users	Added emphasis on autonomous systems and separation of freight and passenger traffic	Technology & Operations: Greater focus on engineered and technology-driven safety solutions
Environmental Sustainability	Priority criterion emphasizing GHG reduction, climate alignment, land use integration, and brownfield redevelopment	No longer a priority criterion; emphasis on infrastructure resilience and specific green infrastructure treatments	Climate to Resilience: Shift from emissions outcomes to physical durability and risk mitigation
Quality of Life	Affordable transportation options, mixed-use integration, and reduced vehicle dependence	Focus on user experience for families and caregivers (e.g., nursing spaces, accessibility, wayfinding)	User-Centered Design: More explicit attention to comfort, accessibility for families, and caregiver needs
Mobility & Community Connectivity	Transit and non-motorized connectivity; removal of physical barriers	Explicit inclusion of roadway capacity improvements; continued emphasis on access	Modal Shift: Increased emphasis on motor vehicle capacity at the expense of active transportation
Economic Competitiveness & Opportunity	Regional economic growth, job creation, and supply chain efficiency	Emphasis on domestic industrial policy, energy and maritime sectors, reshoring, and union labor	Targeted Industrial Policy: Stronger alignment with national supply chain and workforce priorities
State of Good Repair	Rehabilitation and maintenance of existing assets	Priority on assets with high failure consequences, such as bridges with long detours	Risk-Based Investment: Focus on network-critical and high-impact assets
Partnership & Collaboration	General coordination and workforce development	Required partnerships supporting training, placement, and retention through apprenticeships	Workforce Outcomes: Shift toward measurable, high-quality workforce pipelines
Innovation	Use of innovative technologies and project delivery approaches	Focus on cargo theft prevention, freight efficiency, and autonomous vehicle deployment	Freight & Automation: Innovation tied to supply chain security and advanced vehicle systems

Benefit-Cost Analysis

A major change this year is USDOT's adoption of a **graded Benefit-Cost Analysis (BCA) rating system** (see pages 23 & 42). Instead of classifying projects as simply having a positive or negative BCA, applications will now be evaluated on a scale ranging from **High to Low**.

BCA Rating	Explanation
High	Benefit-Cost Ratio (BCR) \geq 2.0; benefits significantly exceed costs
Medium-High	Benefits will exceed its costs
Medium	Benefits are likely to exceed its costs .
Medium-Low	Costs are likely to exceed its benefits
Low	Costs will exceed its benefits



This change allows USDOT to differentiate among projects that all clear a positive benefit-cost threshold and consider economic performance as a stronger selection differentiator. **For Tier 2 advancement, a project needs a Medium to High BCA Rating and demonstrate favorable project readiness ratings.**

Funding Details

Key funding parameters remain consistent with FY 2025 ([see FY 2025 NOFO here](#)):

- A maximum award size of **\$25 million** (with potential additional funds from cancelled or withdrawn projects)
- Minimum capital project requests of **\$1 million** for rural areas and **\$5 million** for urban areas
- Eligibility for **planning grants, with no minimum award size** and a statutory set-aside of at least **5 percent of total funding**
- Federal cost shares of up to 80 percent, or up to 100 percent for projects located in rural areas or Areas of Persistent Poverty/Historically Disadvantaged Communities

USDOT notes that additional selection considerations may include **a higher percent of non-Federal funding, project readiness, location in Qualified Opportunity Zones**, and whether the project has **received a previous TIGER/RAISE/BUILD grant**.

Structural Changes for FY 2026

The FY 2026 BUILD competition will **operate as a single funding round**, replacing the two-round structure used in FY 2025.

Unlike prior cycles, **FY 2025 Projects of Merit will NOT carry forward**; applicants must submit new applications to be considered. However, USDOT has established a forward-looking Project of Merit policy: FY 2026 applications that advance to the **Highly Rated list but are not selected will automatically be designated as Projects of Merit and carried into the FY 2027 competition**, subject to authorization and appropriations.

FY 2026 Redistribution of Certain Authorized Highway Funds

FHWA announced the redistribution of **\$259.7 million** in certain authorized funds for Federal-aid highway programs. The redistribution applies to the period **October 1, 2025, through January 30, 2026**, and is required under the [Continuing Appropriations Act, 2026](#).

This action is a routine, congressionally mandated budget mechanism tied to how federal highway programs are authorized under IIJA, constrained by annual obligation limits, and ultimately made available for obligation.

Why this redistribution happened. “Certain authorized highway funds” are federal highway dollars that Congress has already approved under the IIJA for FY 2026, but that cannot be used immediately because of annual spending caps set in appropriations law. Rather than allowing those funds to sit unused, federal law requires FHWA to redistribute them to states. Once redistributed, the funds are STBG-eligible and can be programmed accordingly, subject to existing obligation limits.



Because the federal government is operating under a continuing resolution, FHWA is distributing only a proportional share of the annualized total for this period:

- The redistribution reflects **33.42% of the annualized total**, corresponding to the 122 days covered by the continuing resolution.
- Funds are distributed to states in the same proportions as FY 2026 formula obligation limitation for that same period.

Key Details

- **Total redistributed amount:** \$259,734,827
- **Period covered:** October 1, 2025 – January 30, 2026 (122 days of FY 2026)
- **Eligible uses:** Any purpose eligible under [23 U.S.C. §133\(b\)](#) (STBG-eligible activities)
- **Funds flow to:** State DOTs
 - **Note:** The funds are STBG-eligible. MPO-identified projects may ultimately benefit from these funds, depending on state programming decisions, coordination, and obligation limits.
- **Availability:** Immediately available; **must be obligated by September 30, 2029**
- **No new obligation authority** is provided with these funds
 - **Note:** Because these funds do not come with additional obligation authority, states must rely on existing obligation limits to use them.

State Allocations

The \$259.7 million total is distributed across all states and D.C. Examples include:

- **Texas:** \$25.6 million (largest allocation)
- **California:** \$24.1 million
- **Florida:** \$12.4 million
- **New York:** \$11.0 million
- **Pennsylvania:** \$10.8 million
- **District of Columbia:** \$1.0 million (smallest allocation)

Access the full state-by-state table [here](#).

This redistribution does not represent new or additional highway funding, but it does release previously authorized, flexible STBG-eligible dollars that may support state and MPO priorities during FY 2026. The practical impact will vary by state, depending on available obligation authority and project readiness. For MPOs, staying closely engaged with state DOT partners on timing, obligation capacity, and project sequencing will be key to positioning regional priorities to move forward as opportunities arise.



Congress

Congressional “Vibe” Check

Appropriations. With the [current Continuing Resolution](#) (CR) **expiring January 30**, Congress is facing a tightening clock, and progress on FY 2026 appropriations has slowed. The Senate adjourned Thursday night without advancing a five-bill minibuss (which **includes the THUD bill**), after Senators Michael Bennet (D-CO) and John Hickenlooper (D-CO) placed holds over concerns about proposed changes to the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR). This followed the administration’s announcement that it intends to break up the NCAR laboratory, prompting pushback from the CO delegation and stalling Senate action.

The minibuss had cleared internal Republican holds earlier in the week. However, Democrats are still negotiating amendments related to energy, environment, and science funding. With the shutdown deadline approaching and both chambers still working to resolve topline funding levels, appropriators now expect **negotiations to resume in early January**.

Reauthorization. Reauthorization activity continues to accelerate as committees refine draft language and shape early outlines of the next surface transportation bill.

Where things stand:

- **House T&I** staff (majority and minority) are actively exchanging draft sections.
 - NHTSA, FMCSA, and FTA titles have already circulated internally. The **highway title is expected next**.
 - Once base text is released (likely early 2026) proposals not already included will face a much steeper path through amendment.
- **Senate EPW** is furthest along among Senate committees, with Chair Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV) [signaling plans](#) to release draft text and hold a markup in early March 2026; Commerce and Banking are continuing early-stage drafting.
- **On the Administration side**, FHWA, FTA, and other USDOT operating administrations are transmitting their reauthorization proposals to the Office of Management and Budget, the final step before formal submission to Congress.

House timing and dynamics

- **Now:** Staff-to-staff exchanges of base text are underway across House T&I.
 - Other key house Committees and off-committee members are beginning to identifying their reauthorization priorities.
- **Winter 2026:** Bill text is expected to be released, with markups anticipated in Q1.



- **Early Spring 2026:** Potential floor consideration. [Chairman Graves' \(T&I\) goal](#) is House passage in the spring.
- **IJA expiration — Sept. 30, 2026:** There will be pressure for passage ahead of the IJA's expiration, though CRs or short-term extensions are possible.
- **Political calendar:** With the 2026 midterms approaching (and the House widely expected to flip), and with Chair Graves in his final term, House leadership has strong incentives to finish work this Congress.

Senate Timing: Currently, the EPW Committee is furthest along in their drafting process. The Senate process generally moves more slowly and involves more complex negotiation:


- **Multiple committees share jurisdiction.** While House T&I develops most of the bill in a single committee, the Senate divides responsibility across three: Environment and Public Works (highways), Commerce (safety, freight, rail), and Banking (transit). Coordinating text among them adds time and procedural complexity.
 - **Jurisdictional overlap creates additional negotiation.** Even with separate titles, many issues cross committee lines. Cross-committee issues require alignment before text can move.
- **The Senate is typically a more deliberative body.** Surface transportation bills typically rely on broad bipartisan consensus, which takes time to build.
- **The Senate often responds to the House.** Senate committees frequently wait to see the contours of the House bill before locking in major decisions, naturally pushing their timeline later.

A general note on timing: Given the pace of remaining FY 2026 appropriations work, expected policy debates, and the long history of surface transportation bills missing their statutory deadlines, a CR is certainly possible. Even so, MPOs should operate under the assumption that **reauthorization could move on time**. This engagement window will not open twice and once base text is released, shaping major provisions becomes significantly harder.

What Can MPOs Do? (visit AMPO's reauthorization hub [here](#)) This is a critical window for MPO engagement. A few high-impact steps:

- ☐ **Share the [LOT Coalition Letter](#)** with your congressional delegation.
- ☐ **Meet with Your Delegation** (DC and district staff) to flag regional and national priorities.
- ☐ **Brief Your Boards and Partners** so local leaders speak with a unified regional voice.
- ☐ **Use [AMPO Tools](#)** for templates and messaging examples.
- ☐ **Need help?** Contact [Katie Economou](#), AMPO Legislative Director for support.




Congressional Buzz on Reauthorization

-  **[Moving Transit Forward Act Reintroduced](#):** Senators Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) and John Fetterman (D-PA) have reintroduced the [Moving Transit Forward Act](#), which would establish a new, permanent federal funding program at USDOT to help transit agencies cover operating expenses. The proposal addresses limitations in federal transit policy that restrict funding in major metropolitan areas to capital uses. It would allow federal support for service expansion, increased frequency, safety and security improvements, and the






prevention or reversal of service cuts. It includes maintenance-of-effort requirements and is framed as a tool to stabilize transit service amid ridership and fare revenue challenges.

National Perspectives on Reauthorization

-  [**Rails-to-Trails Coalition Urges Congress to Protect Transportation Alternatives Program:**](#) A coalition led by Rails to Trails Conservancy and national biking, walking, and trail organizations is circulating a sign-on letter **urging congressional leaders to preserve and strengthen federal support for active transportation in the upcoming surface transportation reauthorization.** The letter calls for maintaining a robust Transportation Alternatives (TA) program, continuing safety provisions for vulnerable road users, and preserving broad eligibility for walking and bicycling projects across core formula and discretionary programs.
 - **Context note:** Active transportation groups are paying close attention to [recent statements](#) by Chairman Graves emphasizing a desire for a “traditional infrastructure bill” and skepticism toward federal spending on uses such as “murals” or certain bike/ped projects. These remarks have **heightened concern over how eligibility may be defined in the next bill:** an issue many view as a high-stakes inflection point for multimodal investment.
-  [**Local Officials for Transportation \(LOT\) Coalition: Advancing Local Control in Reauthorization:**](#) The LOT Coalition (including AMPO) is finalizing a legislative proposal focused on strengthening local control within federal surface transportation programs. The effort would modernize current frameworks to better reflect how projects are planned and delivered on the ground, improving regional access to funding while maintaining accountability and supporting strong safety outcomes.
 - **Context note:** This work responds to a consistent signal from both sides of the aisle: **local control is emerging as a top priority in the reauthorization debate.** Majority committee has identified it as one of their three highest priorities, and minority has likewise emphasized it as a top issue. The LOT proposal seeks to provide Congress with a practical, implementable approach to advancing this shared interest. More details coming soon!
-  [**ACT Outlines TDM Priorities for Reauthorization:**](#) The Association for Commuter Transportation (ACT) is urging Congress to elevate Transportation Demand Management (TDM) in federal law by defining TDM in Title 23, expanding eligible uses across programs, supporting rural and disadvantaged communities, and piloting new research and grant structures. ACT argues that clearer TDM authority will help maximize existing assets and improve system efficiency nationwide.
-  [**Coalition Presses Congress on Youth and Family Transportation Priorities:**](#) The Sierra Club and the Outdoors Alliance for Kids met with Members of Congress to discuss priorities for reauthorization including support for preserving and strengthening TAP, advancing the [Transit to Trails Act](#), extending the SS4A program, and increasing funding for the Federal Lands Transportation Program, the Nationally Significant Federal Lands and Tribal Projects Program, and the Federal Lands Access Program.





What's Making Headlines? A number of transportation issues on the Hill are drawing attention this week outside of reauthorization.

-  [House Passes Clean Water Act Permitting Reform Bill](#): The House approved the [PERMIT Act](#) by a 221–205 vote, advancing legislation to streamline Clean Water Act permitting by adding timelines, limiting litigation, and narrowing states' ability to block projects on water quality grounds. Supporters say the changes provide greater regulatory certainty for infrastructure and energy projects, while most Democrats opposed the bill, citing concerns about weakened environmental protections. The measure now moves to the Senate for consideration.
-  [House Financial Services Committee Unveils Housing Package](#): The House Financial Services Committee leaders have introduced the bipartisan [Housing for the 21st Century Act](#), a comprehensive housing package that follows the Senate's earlier passage of the [ROAD to Housing Act of 2025](#) and signals continued momentum for federal housing legislation this Congress. While narrower in scope than the Senate bill, the House proposal incorporates several overlapping provisions aimed at boosting housing supply by reducing regulatory barriers, supporting infill and “missing middle” housing, encouraging TOD, and modernizing HUD programs like HOME and CDBG. At the same time, it omits certain Senate-passed elements, including incentives for housing near transit and expanded bank investment authority for affordable housing (read a full breakdown of the bill [here](#)).
-  [House Passes SPEED Act](#): The House approved the [SPEED Act](#), a major overhaul of NEPA, by a 221–196 vote. The bill aims to shorten permitting timelines, limit litigation, and restrict an administration's ability to revoke project permits. The bill now moves to the Senate for further negotiation. While the bill does not amend transportation programs directly, it changes the environmental review framework that governs how most transportation projects are approved and implemented.







Administration & Agencies

USDOT


-  [NHTSA Schedules Public Hearing on SAFE Vehicle Rule III CAFE Standards](#): announced it will hold a virtual **public hearing on January 7, 2026**, to receive comments on the proposed Safer Affordable Fuel-Efficient ([SAFE](#)) Vehicle Rule III, which would establish Corporate Average Fuel Economy ([CAFE](#)) standards for passenger cars and light trucks for model years 2022 through 2031 ([read AMPO's analysis here](#)). The hearing will also cover public input on the Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) accompanying the proposal. NHTSA indicated that an additional virtual hearing session may be held on **January 8, 2026**, if needed, depending on public interest.
-  [FTA Releases Major Event Playbook](#): FTA announced the release of a new Major Event Playbook designed to help public transportation agencies plan for and manage large-scale




events, including upcoming the World Cup. The playbook provides guidance and strategic considerations to support transit agencies as they prepare to move large volumes of passengers while complying with federal transit requirements.

- **Related Congressional Activity:** Recently, on the House T&I Committee, Rep. Burgess Owens (R-UT) and Ranking Member Rick Larsen (D-WA) introduced bipartisan legislation that would provide federal funding to host regions supporting major sporting events like the World Cup ([read AMPO's analysis here](#)).
-  **States Sue USDOT Over Delayed EV Charging Grant Funds:** A coalition of 16 states and DC, has filed suit against the administration, alleging that USDOT unlawfully stalled funding for two electric vehicle charging programs authorized under the IIJA. The lawsuit contends that USDOT paused new obligations under the CFI Program and the Electric Vehicle Charger Reliability and Accessibility Accelerator earlier this year, despite Congress having appropriated the funds. The case follows a prior court decision that compelled the administration to release funding the NEVI charging program ([read AMPO's analysis here](#)).
-  **FTA Letter to Milwaukee on Fare Evasion & Safety:** FTA directed Milwaukee County Transit System officials to submit detailed plans addressing fare evasion and public safety, warning that **failure to comply could result in the redirection or withholding of federal funds**. In letters sent December 12, FTA Administrator Marc Molinaro requested documentation of safety-related funding in fiscal years 2025 and 2026, emphasizing that federal capital grants may be used for crime prevention and security measures.
-  **Audit: Noncompliance in NY Non-Domiciled CDL Program:** FMCSA announced that an audit of New York's non-domiciled commercial driver's license (CDL) program found noncompliance with federal requirements. USDOT has directed New York to halt new and renewed non-domiciled CDL issuances, conduct a comprehensive internal audit, and revoke all noncompliant licenses. If corrective actions are not taken within 30 days, USDOT may **withhold \$73 million in federal highway funding** and pursue further enforcement actions, including potential decertification of the state's CDL program.
-  **CA Lawsuit Over Canceled High-Speed Rail Grants to Proceed:** A federal judge rejected the administration's bid to dismiss California's lawsuit over the termination of roughly \$4 billion in high-speed rail grants, allowing the case to proceed in U.S. district court. The ruling keeps alive California's challenge to FRA's decision to cancel funding for the Central Valley segment.

EPA





-  **Legal Risks Mount for EPA's Endangerment Repeal Strategy:** EPA's plan to repeal the 2009 endangerment finding is facing growing legal pressure due to its reliance on a [controversial DOE report](#) questioning climate science. Courts and critics have flagged the report for procedural and scientific flaws, raising the risk that EPA cannot credibly use it to support a science-based repeal without reopening the rulemaking. As a result, former officials and legal experts expect EPA to drop the climate science critique and rely solely on a legal argument that the Clean Air Act does not authorize greenhouse gas regulation.

FEMA

-  **Court Blocks FEMA From Ending BRIC :** A federal judge ruled that FEMA cannot unilaterally cancel the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (**BRIC**) program, finding that the agency lacks authority to eliminate the congressionally authorized grant program without legislative action. While the ruling prevents FEMA from terminating the program or repurposing its funds, it does not require the agency to immediately award grants, leaving questions about the timing and scope of future funding decisions as the administration continues to review FEMA's spending priorities.



National News

-  **Rural Transit Demand Rises in Nebraska as Funding Falls Short:** Rural public transportation demand is increasing in Nebraska, but agencies are planning service cuts of up to 30 percent for FY 2026 after pandemic-era relief and rollover funds were exhausted. Modest increases in federal rural transit apportionments have not kept pace with inflation or rising ridership, leaving providers with few options beyond reducing hours, trips, or coverage. National transit groups note that while funding pressures are emerging in other states, Nebraska's reductions are unusually severe, with most states considering cuts of less than 10 percent. The situation reflects a broader national challenge as rural and small urban transit demand grows while operating funding remains constrained.
-  **Illinois Approves \$1.5B Transit Funding Package:** Governor JB Pritzker signed a law raising \$1.5 billion to stabilize Chicago-area transit agencies and prevent major service cuts as pandemic aid expires. The law raises funds primarily through a higher regional sales tax and by redirecting motor fuel sales tax revenue and Road Fund interest from highway projects to transit operations, without imposing statewide tax increases. It also creates the Northern Illinois Transit Authority to strengthen regional oversight, coordinate service, and implement a universal fare system over time.
-  **UI: States Move to Mandate Density Near Transit:** A new Urban Institute study finds that housing growth near rail stations outpaced statewide growth in nearly every US state from 2010 to 2020, prompting states and provinces to adopt policies that mandate higher zoning densities near transit. Since 2020, jurisdictions such as California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Washington, British Columbia, and Ontario have set baseline density requirements to support transit-oriented development and counter exclusionary zoning, with approaches varying by transit type, distance, and affordability provisions.
-  **Public Education Key to Mileage-Based Road Funding, Report Finds:** A new Eastern Transportation Coalition report finds most residents do not understand how roads are funded or why gas tax revenues are declining. When provided with clear, state-specific information, public support increases for exploring mileage-based user fees as a long-term



alternative, highlighting education and targeted outreach as critical to future road funding reforms.

Notice of Funding Opportunities

-  [Federal-State Partnership for Intercity Passenger Rail Grant Program – National:](#) This FRA program provides funding for capital projects that reduce the state of good repair backlog, improve performance, or expand or establish new intercity passenger rail service, including privately operated intercity passenger rail service.
 - **Deadline:** January 7, 2026
-  [Tribal Transportation Program Safety Fund \(TTPSF\):](#) TTPSF emphasizes the development of strategic transportation safety plans using a data-driven process as a means for Tribes to identify transportation safety needs and determine how those needs will be addressed in Tribal communities.
 - **Deadline:** January 15, 2026
 - **Note:** Multi-jurisdictional groups are eligible.
-  [Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development \(BUILD\) Grant Program:](#) The goal of the program is to fund projects that will have a significant local or regional impact and improve transportation infrastructure (see analysis in the “Feature Focus” section).
 - **Deadline:** February 24, 2026

 Access **AMPO’s NOFO Tracker** [here](#).

Recent Editions

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