



The National Beat

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Feature Focus

T&I Member Day Hearing, Transportation Project Accountability Act, USDOT Staff Cuts

[House T&I Member Day Hearing](#)

The House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee held its annual Member Day hearing on January 14, giving off-Committee Members a chance to flag district priorities as the Committee ramps up work on surface transportation reauthorization early in the second session of the 119th Congress.

***The TL;DR:** Committee leadership made clear that reauthorization is the top priority for 2026, with plans to move a bill early in the year. Member testimony largely focused on district-specific needs, with recurring themes around discretionary grants, transit investment, permitting reform, project delivery, and safety.*

Committee Leadership: Reauthorization Comes First

In his opening statement, Chairman Sam Graves (R-MO) emphasized that surface transportation reauthorization is the Committee's top priority, with plans to **mark up a bill early this year**. Ranking Member Rick Larsen (D-WA) echoed a bipartisan tone, pointing to incremental improvements in national infrastructure conditions and reaffirming his commitment to **advancing a bipartisan bill** in 2026.

What Members Raised

Member testimony focused far more on projects and programs than on broad structural reform. Several common themes emerged:

- **District-Specific Project Requests:** Many Members highlighted individual highway, bridge, rail, port, aviation, and water infrastructure projects, often tied to safety, freight movement, economic development, or access to hospitals and rural communities.
- **Discretionary Grant Programs:** Multiple Members emphasized the importance of discretionary programs, particularly RAISE, for advancing large or complex projects. Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D-OH) raised concerns about award distribution and unobligated funds, calling for closer oversight. Rural Surface Transportation Program funding also came up as critical for smaller and rural communities.
- **Transit and CIG:** Reps. Brad Sherman (D-CA) and Pramila Jayapal (D-WA) highlighted the role of transit and CIG in relieving congestion, supporting regional growth, and preparing for major events like the 2026 World Cup.
- **State Flexibility and Eligibility:** Several Members called for greater flexibility across federal programs, often framed as a way to reduce administrative burden, improve delivery timelines, and better accommodate state and local conditions.
- **Permitting and Project Delivery:** Permitting predictability was a recurring concern, with references to Clean Water Act permitting, FHWA authority limits, and regulatory complexity more broadly.
- **Safety, Resilience, and Reliability:** Safety cut across nearly all testimony, alongside flood resilience, emergency response, and system reliability.



As the Committee moves toward a markup, Member Day offered a useful snapshot of the issues Members are most likely to press as reauthorization negotiations accelerate.

Transportation Project Accountability Act

Sen. Angela Alsobrooks (D-MD) introduced the [Transportation Project Accountability Act of 2026](#) this week, legislation aimed at strengthening transparency, performance evaluation, and public reporting for major state transportation projects. Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) is a co-sponsor.

***The TL;DR:** The bill would require states to publicly justify and score major transportation projects, strengthening transparency and linking project selection more clearly to performance outcomes.*

Large transportation projects often take years to plan, fund, and deliver, and states spend billions annually in these investments. But for stakeholders trying to follow along, it is not always easy to see and understand why a project rose to the top, what benefits it is expected to deliver, or how performance will be evaluated over time. The bill builds on existing federal performance-based planning requirements by calling for more consistent, project-level public reporting tied to outcomes and goals.

What the Bill Would Do

The bill would amend [Title 23](#) to require states to publish annually an online public report covering major transportation projects included in the STIP with estimated costs **above \$10 million**.

For each covered project, the report would include:

- A **performance-based score** showing how the project aligns with statewide long-range plans and national performance goals under [23 U.S.C. §150\(b\)](#)
- **Anticipated benefits tied to national goals** such as safety, system reliability, and congestion reduction
- The **year the project first appeared in the STIP**
- An **explanation of why the project was selected** and **where it is located**
- A summary of the **metrics used to evaluate and score projects**, along with justification for those metrics

The bill also adds a follow-on expectation: after the first report, states would review whether major projects are achieving projected benefits and cost-effectiveness, and reflect those findings in future STIPs and long-range plans. While the **bill does not create new penalties, it increases visibility into project selection and results over time** by tying reporting to existing planning requirements.

Why It Matters

Supporters argue the bill would improve transparency around major transportation investments and make it easier to connect project decisions to results, both what is promised up front and what is delivered over time. For MPOs and local partners, **more consistent project-level reporting could make it easier to track major investments across STIP cycles and understand how projects align with adopted goals.**



The bill has received support from the Maryland Department of Transportation and national organizations including Transportation for America, Evergreen Action, and the Natural Resources Defense Council. Its focus on **accountability, transparency, and outcomes** aligns closely with themes expected to remain central as reauthorization moves forward.

[USDOT Workforce Cutbacks Reflect Broader Federal Downsizing Push](#)

New federal workforce data show a significant contraction across the civilian government over the last year, driven by a mix of attrition, hiring limits, and [deferred resignation programs](#). The Office of Personnel Management's [workforce tracker](#) shows the federal workforce has declined by **219,922 federal employees** since January 20, 2025, a **10 percent** reduction.

***The TL;DR:** Significant staffing reductions across USDOT, especially at FHWA, FTA, and NHTSA, could affect grant administration, project review timelines, and technical assistance for state, regional, and local partners.*

USDOT has been part of that broader downsizing, though the impacts have not been evenly distributed. Overall staffing declined by **~7 percent**, with the largest reductions concentrated in surface transportation, transit, and safety-focused agencies:

- **FTA:** -30%
- **FHWA:** -28%
- **NHTSA:** -28%
- **OST:** -20%

By contrast, the FAA experienced a much smaller reduction (**around 3 percent**), reflecting a continued emphasis on aviation safety and air traffic control capacity.

Staffing levels matter for how federal transportation programs function day to day. Fewer staff across FHWA, FTA, NHTSA, and parts of OST could affect the pace of grant administration, project reviews, technical assistance, and coordination with state, regional, and local partners.



Congress

Congressional “Vibe” Check

Appropriations. Congressional leaders are narrowing in on a clearer path to finish FY 2026 funding, with transportation (THUD bill) now firmly positioned in the **final phase of negotiations**. House Appropriations Chair Tom Cole (R-OK) said House leaders are considering advancing the THUD bill as part of **a large, four-bill package** that would also include Defense, Labor–HHS–Education, and Homeland Security, though details around Homeland Security are still being worked out. Under the current plan, leadership aims to **release the package late Sunday** and bring it to the **House floor next week**.

This approach is consistent with signals from Senate appropriators, including Chair Susan Collins (R-ME), suggesting growing alignment between the chambers on how to handle the most complex and high-dollar funding bills. With the [current Continuing Resolution \(CR\)](#) **expiring January 30**, bundling THUD with the remaining major bills reflects an effort to force resolution and avoid another short-term funding extension.

Reconciliation...again? House Republicans are exploring the possibility of a [second budget reconciliation bill](#) this Congress, though significant uncertainty remains (AMPO broke down the first reconciliation package in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act analysis [here](#)). This week, the Republican Study Committee released a policy framework outlining options for a potential “reconciliation 2.0,” with a strong emphasis on **energy policy, environmental regulation, and permitting reform**. [Reporting indicates](#) some members are also pressing to include **immigration-related funding** penalties in any potential reconciliation bill. This could potentially include language that could **limit or withhold federal funds from states or local governments** that issue driver’s licenses to undocumented immigrants or are deemed as “sanctuary jurisdictions.”

Chair August Pfluger (R-TX) argued Republicans should continue pressing ahead with reconciliation to advance priorities before the midterms. Supporters view it as a way to lock in policy wins and reduce spending, while critics warn it could deepen partisan divides and face procedural hurdles in the Senate. Leadership has been cautious, and Senate Republicans have not committed to another party-line bill. Still, reconciliation remains a potential vehicle for advancing priorities that may struggle to move through regular order.

Reauthorization. Reauthorization activity continues to accelerate as committees refine draft language and begin shaping the next surface transportation bill.






Where things stand:

- **House T&I.** Majority and minority staff are actively exchanging draft sections. Titles covering **NHTSA, FMCSA, FTA, and FHWA have already circulated internally.** Staff-to-staff negotiations on base text are now underway, and other House committees and off-committee members are beginning to surface their own reauthorization priorities.
 - House timing remains aggressive. Bill text is *expected* to be released in early 2026, with markups anticipated in Q1 and potential floor consideration in early spring. Chairman Graves has stated his **goal of passing a bill out of the House this spring.** With the IIJA set to expire on Sept. 30, 2026, and with Chairman Graves in his final term amid an approaching midterm election cycle, House leadership has strong incentives to complete work this Congress.
- **Senate.** Among Senate committees, Environment and Public Works (EPW) is furthest along. Chair Capito (R-WV) has indicated **plans to release draft text and hold a markup in early March 2026.** By comparison, the Commerce and Banking Committees are continuing early-stage drafting, and their timelines remain less defined.
- **Administration.** 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.


A general note on timing: Given the remaining FY 2026 appropriations work, expected policy debates, and the long history of surface transportation bills missing deadlines, a CR remains 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 via amendment.

Congressional Buzz on Reauthorization

-  **[CBO Outlook Timing Could Shape Reauthorization Strategy](#)**: The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) will release its annual Budget and Economic Outlook on Feb. 11, 2026, a key moment for surface transportation reauthorization. The Outlook sets the budget baseline Congress must use, including projections for the Highway Trust Fund as the IIJA authorization expires in September. Because the new baseline will reflect the repeal of EV tax credits and certain fuel economy rules, lawmakers could see a noticeably improved funding outlook, **potentially reducing the need for new revenue by up to \$15 billion.** Committees may wait for this update before releasing bill text, even as uncertainty around permitting reform continues to complicate the broader reauthorization timeline.
-  **[Build HUBS Act Links Housing and Transportation Investment](#)**: Senators Lisa Blunt Rochester (D-DE) and John Curtis (R-UT) introduced the Build HUBS Act, bipartisan legislation aimed at **increasing housing supply near transit and transportation hubs.** The bill would extend USDOT's TIFIA program for five years and establish a new transit-oriented development financing program to support projects that integrate transportation investments with housing and mixed-use development. The proposal underscores growing congressional interest in using transportation policy to address housing supply and affordability challenges. *AMPO will provide an analysis of the bill in next week's edition of The National Beat.*
-  **[AV Framework Draws Support at House Energy and Commerce \(E&C\) Hearing](#)**: The **SELF Drive Act**, a proposed federal framework for autonomous vehicles, received a generally positive reception at a recent House E&C hearing. Supporters emphasized its

potential to expand mobility, particularly for people with disabilities and rural communities. Sponsored by Rep. Latta (R-OH), the bill would allow deployment of AVs without manual controls while requiring safety reporting to NHTSA. While some concerns about safety and oversight remain, the hearing suggested growing interest in establishing a consistent federal AV framework. E&C Committee leadership has signaled that the panel intends to advance a final version of the bill through the upcoming surface transportation reauthorization, **positioning AV policy as part of the broader reauthorization debate.**




National Perspectives on Reauthorization

-  [**Leadership Changes Across State DOTs and AASHTO**](#): Early 2026 has brought a wave of leadership changes across state DOTs and at AASHTO, positioning new leaders to shape reauthorization conversations. Recent appointments include Katie Thomson (MD), Nick Donohue (VA), Kris Kolluri (NJ), and Mike Flynn (NYC). At the national level, Russell McMurry and Marc Williams have stepped into AASHTO's top leadership roles, with [**stated priorities**](#) on engaging Congress in reauthorization, improving project delivery, and advancing safety.



Administration & Agencies

USDOT

-  [**Secretary Duffy Pushes to Expand USDOT Authority Over Permitting and Project Approvals**](#): Draft proposals circulating within USDOT suggest Secretary Sean Duffy is exploring ways to **expand USDOT's authority to accelerate project approvals, including potential waivers of certain environmental review requirements.** While still preliminary, the discussions point to a broader administration focus on speeding project delivery and reducing review timelines. This is an issue that continues to surface across reauthorization, appropriations, and permitting debates on Capitol Hill.
-  [**US Withdrawal From International Highway Research Body**](#): President Trump signed an Executive Order directing federal agencies, including USDOT, to withdraw from dozens of international organizations and treaties deemed contrary to US interests. Among them is the [**Forum of European National Highway Research Laboratories**](#), a long-standing cooperative network focused on highway engineering, safety, and infrastructure performance. While part of a broader pullback from international climate, energy, and multilateral institutions, the withdrawal may signal a narrowing of US participation in international transportation research and technical exchange.
-  [**USDOT Drops Appeal on Immigration Conditions for Transportation Funding**](#): USDOT has formally dropped its appeal of a court ruling that blocked the Department from conditioning federal transportation funding on state cooperation with immigration enforcement. The decision leaves in place limits on USDOT's authority to link infrastructure dollars to immigration-related policies, reinforcing long-standing separations between transportation programs and non-transportation enforcement actions. The move follows litigation brought by a coalition of states and comes amid ongoing tension between the administration and several states on immigration policy.






- [!\[\]\(1207edb9a08751d3d55970560645ed23_img.jpg\) **Safer Affordable Fuel-Efficient \(SAFE\) Vehicles Rule III**](#): USDOT has extended the public comment period for the proposed Safer Affordable Fuel-Efficient (SAFE) Vehicles Rule III through **Feb. 4, 2026**. The proposal would substantially revise the Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) program by recalibrating standards for model years 2022–2031, altering credit structures, and excluding EV and plug-in hybrid performance from standard-setting. (Read AMPO’s analysis on the rule [here](#).)
- [!\[\]\(d7a34a706cfa4ef37c62a369101e1b36_img.jpg\) **USDOT Seeks Input on FY 2026–2030 Transportation Research Strategy**](#): USDOT has issued a RFI seeking public input to inform its FY 2026–2030 Research, Development, and Technology (RD&T) Strategic Plan, with comments due Feb. 12, 2026. The five-year plan will guide federal transportation research priorities across areas such as safety, mobility, infrastructure durability, congestion reduction, and emerging risks like cybersecurity, offering an early opportunity for stakeholders to shape the Department’s research agenda.

USDOT Enforcement Actions on CDL Compliance

USDOT is significantly escalating enforcement of federal commercial driver’s license (CDL) requirements, signaling that states that fail to correct identified violations risk losing substantial federal transportation funding. These actions continue to raise legal, operational, and workforce concerns across several states. Read [last week’s National Beat](#) for additional context.



- [!\[\]\(f15d3c54be60b4fd0ce1da9fb3f67256_img.jpg\) **Tennessee Requires CDL Holders to Verify Citizenship or Legal Status**](#): Tennessee has begun notifying approximately 8,000 CDL holders that they must verify US citizenship or lawful residence by April 6, following a records audit by the state’s Department of Safety and Homeland Security. State officials say the effort is intended to bring older CDL records (i.e., many issued before current documentation requirements) into compliance with federal rules. Industry groups, including the Tennessee Trucking Association, have characterized the move as a proactive step to protect the integrity of the CDL system. Tennessee joins several other states reportedly taking similar actions in response to evolving federal enforcement expectations.
- [!\[\]\(7bf135d42c40a6430c927b2fd03d7659_img.jpg\) **Trucking Group Sues Trump Administration Over Immigrant CDL Enforcement**](#): A group representing truck drivers has filed a federal lawsuit challenging the Trump administration’s approach to enforcing CDL requirements for legal immigrants. The suit alleges that federal pressure has effectively frozen California’s ability to issue or renew CDLs for otherwise qualified drivers, including asylum seekers and refugees. The complaint points to directives from the FMCSA that have resulted in an indefinite pause on license processing. The lawsuit follows [USDOT’s announcement](#) that **~\$160 million in future funding from the NHPP and STBG program would be withheld from California** over missed compliance deadlines related to CDL expiration rules.
 - **Important Note:** The STBG program includes both state-controlled and suballocated funds. While USDOT has not clarified how penalties will be applied within each program, these actions raise concerns that locally controlled transportation funding could be affected, even though local governments and MPOs have no authority over state CDL licensing practices. AMPO will continue monitoring these enforcement actions and seek clarity on how suballocated funds may be treated.

EPA


-  **EPA Proposal Would Narrow State and Tribal Role in Permitting:** EPA has proposed a rule that would significantly revise how states and tribes exercise authority under [Section 401 of the Clean Water Act](#), limiting reviews to direct water-quality impacts and reinforcing a one-year deadline for certification decisions. The administration argues the changes would improve predictability and prevent permitting delays, while state, tribal, and environmental advocates warn the proposal could weaken long-standing protections and further constrain local oversight.
-  **EPA Endangerment Finding Repeal Advances to White House Review:** EPA has sent its draft final rule repealing the 2009 greenhouse gas endangerment finding to the White House for review. If finalized, the repeal would remove the agency's legal basis for regulating greenhouse gas emissions under the Clean Air Act, setting up a major shift in federal climate policy and a likely round of litigation. The move aligns with broader administration actions to roll back federal climate regulations and withdraw from international climate commitments.
-  **EPA to Drop Monetized Health Benefits From Air Pollution Rulemaking:** EPA plans to stop assigning dollar values to public health benefits when conducting cost-benefit analyses for air pollution regulations. While the agency says health impacts will still be considered qualitatively, critics argue the shift could make it easier to weaken pollution standards and may face legal challenges. The change represents a significant departure from long-standing regulatory practice.





National News

-  **Administration Criticism of New York City Congestion Pricing:** President Trump criticized New York City's congestion pricing program this week, calling for it to be ended immediately. New York officials pushed back, pointing to data showing reduced vehicle traffic entering Manhattan, increased safety, and a boost in funding for transit improvements. The exchange underscores the continued political tension surrounding congestion pricing, even as other cities watch New York's experience closely (read AMPO's analysis of the issue [here](#)).
-  **Major Transit Investment Could Close US Gap With Global Peers:** A new Transportation for America [analysis](#) argues that a sustained \$4.6 trillion investment in public transportation over 20 years could significantly narrow the gap between US transit systems and those in peer countries, without exceeding expected highway spending. The report highlights fewer transit vehicles per capita in US cities and frames reauthorization as a key opportunity to reassess long-term investment priorities around mobility, cost, and system performance.

Notice of Funding Opportunities

-  **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:** Jan. 15, 2026
 - **Note:** Multi-jurisdictional groups are eligible.
-  **Federal-State Partnership for Intercity Passenger Rail Grant Program – National:**
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, if an eligible applicant is involved.
 - **Deadline:** Feb. 6, 2026
-  **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:** Feb. 24, 2026

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

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