American Society of
Landscape Architects

Landscape Architects Design Multimodal Transportation Networks for All

Figure 1
2011 ASLA Professional General Design Award of Excellence.
Portland Mall Revitalization. ZGF Architects LLP
(Image credit: ZGF Architects LLP)

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Figure 2
Jackson Street Reconstruction Project. Toole Design
(Image credit: Bruce Buckley Photography for Toole Design)

Landscape Architects Design Multimodal Transportation Networks for All

Upgrading our national infrastructure to include a multimodal transportation network that is safe for all users, addresses the impacts of climate change, and is environmentally and socially just is paramount. Our nation's current auto-centric transportation system is outdated, perpetuates our dependence on fossil fuels, and does not safely meet the needs of all users. Many communities want less-costly, more convenient, and more environmentally sound active transportation options such as bicycling, walking, rolling, and access to public transportation. Landscape architects have the education, training, and a proven track record to lead the design, planning, and implementation of multimodal transportation projects that are safe and accessible for all users.

Reauthorizing the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act before its expiration in September 2021, provides us all with a unique opportunity to chart a new course for transportation infrastructure in this country, including: expanding active transportation networks, making user safety a priority, and addressing climate change and environmental and social justice. ASLA has worked with coalition partners and allied organizations to help craft, introduce, and support several bills that would help achieve these important goals. ASLA urges Congress and the Biden-Harris administration to include the following policies, practices, and recommendations in our nation's next surface transportation reauthorization measure:

Figure 3
2019 ASLA Professional General Design Honor Award. Hunter's Point South Waterfront Park Phase II: A New Urban Ecology. SWA/BALSLEY and WEISS/MANFREDI with ARUP (Image credit: Lloyd/SWA, courtesy of SWA/BALSLEY and WEISS/MANFREDI)

Expanding Active Transportation Programs

- The Transportation Alternatives Enhancement Act (H.R. 463, S. 614), which would increase funding for the Transportation Alternatives program to 10 percent of the Surface Transportation Block Grant program. The measure would also allow states to sub-allocate funding to counties, local governments, and Metropolitan Planning Organizations and other regional transportation organizations to have local control over funding and projects.
- The Safe Routes to School Expansion Act (H.R. 386), which would expand eligibility under the Highway Safety Improvement Program to include projects under the Safe Routes to School Program such as sidewalks, crosswalks, signage and bus stop shelters, and more. The measure would also allow projects to be completed entirely with federal funds, without requiring a local match.
- The Complete Streets Act of 2021 (H.R. 1289, S. 425), which would set aside 5 percent of federal highway funding for states to create a Complete Streets program and projects. To access funding, states would be required to establish a technical assistance program and award funding for communities to build Complete Streets projects. Under the measure, the U.S. Secretary of Transportation would be required to adopt design standards for the safe and accessible accommodation of all users.
- The Connecting America's Active Transportation Systems Act (S. 6864), which would authorize funding to create seamless active transportation networks and spines within and between communities. This is a critical step to connect walking and biking infrastructure into active transportation networks that allow people to reach destinations within a community, as well as travel between communities, without needing a car.

Figure 4
2009 ASLA Professional General Design Award of Excellence. Buffalo Bayou Promenade. SWA Group (Image credit: Tom Fox)

Addressing Climate Change and Resiliency in Transportation Projects

- Establish a climate change and resiliency advisory committee within the U.S. Department of Transportation that would provide advice, counsel, and expertise regarding innovative policies, strategies, and projects to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase climate resiliency. Unlike many other federal advisory committees that are comprised of cabinet-level officials, ASLA recommends that this advisory committee be comprised of transportation practitioners, design professionals—like landscape architects and civil engineers—climate policy specialists, environmental scientists, community leaders, and other on-the-ground professionals who have produced successful climate change and resiliency work in the transportation field.
- Clarify that green infrastructure projects and other nature-based solutions in rights-of-way are eligible activities for funding under the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Act (CMAQ). The main goal of the CMAQ program is to fund transportation projects that reduce regulated emissions associated with carbon monoxide, ozone, and particulate matter pollution in nonattainment and maintenance areas, often through congestion mitigation techniques. Current project examples include pedestrian and bicycle projects, transit improvements, alternative fuels and vehicles, carpooling programs, and others. Green infrastructure projects are cost-efficient, highly effective tools to improve air quality—particularly in nonattainment areas—and to address climate change. However, under current law, it is unclear if green infrastructure projects are eligible under CMAQ.

- To help ensure that federal transportation projects are planned, designed, and constructed in a manner that is environmentally sensitive and addresses climate change, adopt the Sustainable Sites Initiative® (SITES®) for all new federal transportation projects. Developed by ASLA, the Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center at The University of Texas at Austin, and the United States Botanic Garden, SITES is a comprehensive rating system that assesses the sustainable planning, design, construction, and maintenance of designed sites. The SITES program promotes practices that conserve, restore, and improve the carbon storage capacity of landscapes and encourages project teams to minimize energy consumption and use low-carbon and renewable energy sources. The General Services Administration (GSA) has already adopted SITES for its capital construction program and this tool could be easily applied to transportation projects.

Figure 5
Riding Through the Park.
Three generation family walking through a public park.

Ensuring Transportation Projects Are Just

- The Restoring Neighborhoods and Strengthening Communities Program (S. 5065, 116th Congress) (*also known as the Highways to Boulevards initiative*), would create a pilot program aimed helping communities tear down urban highways, and rebuild the surrounding neighborhoods with the needs of underserved communities in mind. Funds would only be available for projects located in regions with a high concentration of low-income residents or residents of color, and could also be used for community engagement and capacity building, community land trusts, bike lanes, sidewalks, transit improvements, and other transportation projects that do not increase net capacity for vehicular travel.
- The Community-Driven Decision-Making Pilot Program, would fund up to ten partnerships between local transportation planning agencies and community-based organizations to ensure that transportation decisions reflect the goals and priorities of the community.

- Elevate Context Sensitive Solutions (CSS) as a necessary tool in the decision-making and design process for transportation projects, particularly for projects in underserved communities, Black communities, and other communities of color. Context Sensitive Solutions is a collaborative, interdisciplinary decision-making process and design approach that involves all stakeholders to develop a transportation facility that fits its physical setting. A CSS-compliant project is in harmony with the community, and it preserves the environmental, scenic, aesthetic, historic, and natural resource values of the area. Unfortunately, many underserved communities and communities of color have not been allowed to benefit from the tools and goals of the CSS approach, leaving them with infrastructure that does not fit their needs, and in some instances is harmful to the area.
- The Transit to Trails Act (H.R. 4273, S. 2467 – 116th Congress), would provide funding for transit routes in critically underserved communities to provide access to parks, public lands, and other outdoor greenspaces. The measure is based on a successful program in Los Angeles County connecting residents of Los Angeles with their local public lands, thereby removing barriers and increasing access to outdoor recreation opportunities for underserved urban and rural areas.

Figure 6
2020 ASLA Professional Urban Design Honor Award. The 606. Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates
(Image credit: Scott Shigley)

Promoting Transportation Enhancements

- Provide dedicated funding from the National Highway Performance Program for the protection of wildlife corridors that intersect with vehicle rights-of-way and establish critical reporting and training opportunities on the issue. This dedicated funding will help reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions to protect motorists and allow wildlife to safely cross highways.

- Provide continued funding and resources for the National Scenic Byways Program, a grassroots collaborative within the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) to help recognize, preserve, and enhance selected roads throughout the United States. Also, create a new Scenic Byways Quality Assistance Program that would allow FHWA to work with nonprofit entities to conduct research to advance the understanding of scenic byways' economic benefits and provide customized technical assistance to improve scenic byways' performance.
- Protect the visual resources of our nation's rights-of-way by modifying existing law to clarify that only State Departments of Transportation can direct the cutting of publicly owned trees on publicly owned land for specific purposes such as safety and other clear public interest issues. The private sector should not be allowed to cut down trees on public land for their own commercial purposes, including for billboards. These actions action violate homeowner rights and depress property values without any input from homeowners, and negatively impacts Federal-aid highways, putting existing Federal investment at risk.

Conclusion

Today, communities across America increasingly want active transportation projects, such as bicycle, pedestrian, and trails projects, that provide cost-effective transportation choices, strengthen local economies, improve public health, address climate change, and create local job opportunities. Landscape architects play an essential role in the planning, designing, and implementation of active transportation projects, whether it is creating bicycle and pedestrian pathways that lead to critical daily activities, designing recreational trails projects, or ensuring that America's children have safe routes to school. As Congress and the Biden-Harris administration begin to address our nation's failing infrastructure, including its crumbling transportation systems, ASLA urges policy makers to include the above recommendations in a comprehensive transportation law and to continue working with landscape architects on creating more vibrant, resilient, and just projects for all communities.