



NATIONAL SKILLS COALITION  
Every worker. Every industry. A strong economy.

# Building a People-Centered Infrastructure Plan for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

- A transition plan for the Department of Transportation (DOT), in partnership Departments of Energy, Commerce, and Army Corps of Engineers, should champion a people-centered infrastructure plan that encourages job creation *and* ensures all workers have access to skills training necessary to fill those newly created jobs.
- A people-centered infrastructure plan would ensure federal funding prioritizes investments that modernize our infrastructure and help upskill and reskill workers like women and people of color – workers both most impacted by the current crisis and those historically excluded from good infrastructure jobs.

Prior to COVID-19, our nation’s patchwork infrastructure posed a challenge to our nation’s economic standing. The current crisis only emphasizes the need for infrastructure investments<sup>1</sup> and made it even more clear: a strong infrastructure is not just about the economy; it is about people. It is about people’s health and safety tied to our ability to quickly move medical supplies, sanitation equipment, and food across our roads and bridges. It is about people’s equitable access to safe jobs and uninterrupted education through nationally available broadband in a socially distanced world.

In the face of these stark realities and the historic unemployment that is disproportionately impacting Black, Latino and other communities of color, there is renewed momentum for a federal investment in our nation’s infrastructure that meets the scope and scale of our needs. Indeed, a significant investment in our roads and bridges and expanded broadband could create thousands of jobs. But these investments must be anchored by investments in the skills of local people.

Previous infrastructure bills have been heralded as being job creators and vehicles of economic stimulus during recessions. The Obama Administration championed increased infrastructure investments under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) as one component of a strategy to spur economic growth during a downturn.<sup>2</sup> A recent analysis by the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce found that a \$1 trillion investment in infrastructure could create up to eleven million new jobs.<sup>3</sup> Workforce challenges have been acknowledged as

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.infrastructurereportcard.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/COVID-19-Infrastructure-Status-Report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/fastact/factsheets/workforcedbefs.cfm>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.faa.gov/about/office\\_org/headquarters\\_offices/ang/grants/awd/technical/](https://www.faa.gov/about/office_org/headquarters_offices/ang/grants/awd/technical/)

having a significant impact on our country's infrastructure in reauthorizations of the laws that govern our surface transportation, energy, water and aviation systems.<sup>4</sup>

Past efforts, however, have failed to connect the critical link between jobs being created **and preparing workers for those jobs.**

Businesses in infrastructure industries were already facing a stark need for more workers, with as many as 50 percent of workers in some infrastructure industries eligible for retirement over the next 5 years.<sup>5</sup> Investments in our aging infrastructure are critical. Investments in a workforce to repair and rebuild it are just as much so.

- **Work with the White House on an Executive Order directing all agencies with components of an infrastructure package to allocate grant funds to support training workers for in-demand occupations.** As Congress makes progress on a set of bills that will ultimately comprise an infrastructure package, the Secretary of Transportation should work with the White House to ensure grant programs under the Secretary's jurisdiction, and those under the jurisdictions of Commerce, Army Corps of Engineers, Energy, and Environmental Protection Agency, include preferences or set aside funding to train workers for jobs in relevant industries. Grants should include those administered by the Federal Highway Administration; the Federal Transit Administration; the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration; Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration; Federal Railroad Administration; Federal Aviation Administration; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; the National Telecommunications and Information Administration; the Department of Energy, Housing and Urban Development; and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.
- **Apply priority—under the Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (TIFIA)—to projects that address, in proposals, how the project will support workforce development for workers within the project area.** The Secretary should require any project funded under TIFIA to describe their workforce development plan to train workers within the zip codes encompassed by the project. Under the existing Secretarial authority, to prioritize projects that “anchor transformative, positive, and long-lasting changes that will result in increased investment in the economic competitiveness of the neighborhood and region,” the Department should prioritize those applicants who can demonstrate the impact their projects will have on access to skills for workers in the communities in which the projects are being built.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epa-announces-water-workforce-initiative-help-recruit-and-prepare-next-generation-clean>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2014/07/02/americas-infrastructure-needs-the-next-generation-of-workers/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.transportation.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/2020-02/Chapter%203.pdf>

- **Launch a pilot program on Local Labor Hiring**, building on the Obama-era Geographic-based hiring preference program.<sup>7</sup> The Secretary should reissue guidance that allows for hiring preference in targeted local areas. This new pilot program should include connections to long-term education and training pathways for participants in the programs and dedicated technical assistance on connecting workers with on-the-job learning and access to training that leads to in-demand credentials. The department should also provide technical assistance to ensure contractors are connected to local workforce development boards and economic development resources that can support deliverance of on-the-job learning, through registered apprenticeship programs.
- **Issue guidance to states on effective use of on-the-job training supportive services (OJT/SS) program funds.** The Secretary should issue guidance to states on accessing federal funds available under 23 U.S.C. 140(b) (OJT/SS funds) for workforce training and publicize this guidance to encourage all 50 states to access the formula funding. Annually, about \$6 million is used to fund the OJT/SS Program, intended to support state highway agencies' training programs and increase opportunities for women and people of color who are underrepresented in those agencies' workforce.
- **Measure and track demographic information on hiring and training by states and contractors.** The Department should track all trainee participants in OJT/SS or other training programs run by DOT. States and contractors should be required to enter demographic, employment, wage and certification attainment information into a federal database to facilitate better tracking and targeting of future investments.
- **Encourage states to use surface transportation training funds.** Under 23 U.S.C. 504(e) states can draw down funds from the five core surface transportation programs to support 100 percent federal funding of education, training or workforce development programs to expand the surface transportation workforce. Several states have legislated the use of 504(e) funds, but they are largely underutilized. The Secretary should collect data on states' usage of these funds to develop a benchmark by which to gauge increased usage. The Secretary should also issue guidance encouraging states to better utilize these funds.
- **Support the creation or expansion of transportation sector partnerships in at least 10 states.** The Secretary should build on the work of the National Network for the Transportation Workforce and Regional Surface Transportation Workforce Centers, housed at the Federal Highway Administration, to establish transportation sector partnerships in at least 10 states, corresponding with upcoming megaprojects.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/construction/cqit/sep14local.cfm>

## **America supports these proposals**

In public opinion polling commissioned in spring of 2020, 86 percent of voters want new public investment in infrastructure and 89 percent of voters want any infrastructure investment to include training so local residents can access these jobs.<sup>8</sup>

As part of any efforts to repair and maintain U.S. infrastructure, the Biden Department of Transportation, and other related agencies, should prioritize connections to education and training opportunities for all workers.

For further information regarding these recommendations, please contact Katie Spiker, National Skills Coalition's Director of Government Affairs, at [katies@nationalskillscoalition.org](mailto:katies@nationalskillscoalition.org).

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<sup>8</sup> On behalf of NSC, ALG research conducted a nationwide online survey of N=800 likely 2020 general election voters between May 21-25, 2020.