

U.S. DOT Releases Plan to Reform National Surface Transportation Policies*

The federal approach to surface transportation policy is broken and major changes are needed in the next reauthorization bill to fix it, U.S. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters said Tuesday in unveiling her department's 73-page reform plan.

"Anyone who doesn't believe it is time for a new approach to transportation either hasn't been paying attention, isn't running a business that relies on shipping, or doesn't have to commute to work every day," Peters said at Georgia Tech Research Institute in Atlanta during an event attended by Georgia Transportation Commissioner Gena Abraham.

The proposal does not contain specific legislative language or funding recommendations. It is rather a broad presentation of 25 policy ideas the department wants Congress to consider as it drafts the next six-year surface transportation reauthorization bill. The current law, known as SAFETELU, expires Sept. 30, 2009.

Fresh ideas are needed to refocus, reform, and renew the national approach to highway and transit systems in America, Peters said in calling for "a clean and historic break with the past."

U.S. DOT's policy framework addresses:

- **Federal Role:** The proposal focuses most federal formula funding on transportation safety, the Interstate Highway System plus other highway facilities of national interest, and major metropolitan areas. Discretionary grant funding would support multi-state corridor projects, bottleneck projects, projects of national or regional significance, and innovative metropolitan responses to urban congestion.
- **Safety:** The proposal replaces current safety programs with an integrated safety grant program based on existing state-level Strategic Highway Safety Plans.
- **Program Consolidation:** The proposal consolidates highway and transit programs into three multi-modal funding programs; assigns authority to a single institutional body, chosen through consensus, to plan and fund a major metropolitan-area's transportation projects, regardless of mode; and provides broad eligibility to projects likely to yield the greatest returns.
- **Investment Decisions:** The proposal calls for states and metro areas to set performance goals and document progress toward meeting them; with additional federal grant funds provided to high performing recipients. It would also require benefit/cost analyses for selection of projects receiving substantial federal support.
- **Pricing** The proposal allows tolling on interstates and other major highways, expanded use of public/private partnerships, and broadens use of innovative financing programs.

- **Environmental Stewardship:** The proposal requires state and metropolitan grant recipients to set environmental performance goals and demonstrate progress. A pilot program would be created under which participating states and metro areas are required to meet federally designated performance targets, in exchange for which they receive substantial regulatory relief and “a clear mandate to consider impacts other than those to historic properties and parkland when selecting a transportation alternative.”

The proposal also calls for greatly reducing the 102 federal transportation programs that have proliferated over the last two decades and replacing them with eight intermodal programs. U.S. DOT released its proposal during the same week as the first anniversary of the I-35W bridge collapse, when the nation’s attention was riveted on bridge investment needs. The bridge program is one of the numerous funding categories that would be eliminated under the proposal.

“Under our new approach, planners will no longer have to slice and dice every federal dollar into niche programs that do little to improve commutes,” Peters said. “Instead, state and local officials will be able to make investments in what works and what gets people where they need to go as quickly and as reliably as possible.”

She added, “If new subways, streetcars, or bus routes represent the best investment, communities will have greater freedom and significantly more resources to pay for those projects.”

The reform plan is available at www.fightgridlocknow.gov/reform/reformproposal08.pdf. The department sent its reform plan to all members of Congress for feedback, and said it hopes to release a subsequent legislative proposal by late fall.

* As reported by AASHTO in the August 1, 2008 *AASHTO Journal*