

# Introduction

**State officials across the country are facing the same challenges.** Revenues are falling and budgets are shrinking while transportation demands grow. The traditional means of funding and delivering transportation services are no longer adequate, jeopardizing the path to tomorrow's economy. The only answer is innovation.

Forward-thinking state and agency leaders know that to remain competitive, we must make changes to our transportation systems and update the transportation decision-making process. Though change can be intimidating, it is both possible and essential — as many officials across the country can attest.

States and their departments of transportation (DOTs) are rising to and overcoming the challenges they face. They are improving existing services in the short term and planning effectively for the long term. They are adopting innovative yet pragmatic reforms. They are reevaluating and retooling traditional practices to ensure that those practices continue to provide users with a robust, economically beneficial transportation network. These leaders and agencies are better meeting the needs of their residents, galvanizing political support for their work, and supporting the future prosperity of their state. Their success offers a model for others to follow.

## A call to action for transportation officials

Transportation is at the center of the economy and greatly influences our quality of life. It determines how our states, cities, towns, and neighborhoods function, both now and in the future. Americans spend almost 20 percent of their personal income every year just to get around, and transportation plays a major role in people's choices about where to live and work.

Most state DOTs' goals are ambitious: improve safety, reduce congestion, enhance economic opportunity, improve reliability, preserve system assets, accelerate project delivery, and help to create healthier, more livable neighborhoods, just to name a few. These goals would be daunting even if money were no object, but dwindling conventional federal and state transportation funding makes these goals even harder to achieve.

As a result, DOTs across the country are changing the way they do business. Knowing that America's transportation network is crucial to economic growth and our everyday lives, agencies are taking new approaches to transportation that fit the unique demands of their states and that provide greater benefits at less cost. Each DOT is doing this in its own way: some are focusing solely on increasing revenues; others are maximizing efficiency; many are doing both. And they are working together; state leaders are building coalitions with their peers to keep up with best practices and learn from one another.

**Smarter transportation investments are both possible and popular: the challenge is determining where to begin.**

## About this handbook

This handbook collects the innovative approaches that state transportation leaders are already using to make systems more efficient and effective in today's challenging economy. Smarter transportation

investments are both possible and popular; the challenge is determining where to begin and to whom to reach out for support and guidance.

Every state is different, from the political climate to the age and condition of its existing transportation systems. There is no silver bullet transportation recommendation that fits all 50 states. However, state officials can learn from other DOTs that have successfully charted a new course for transportation in their state. A few common keys to success include:

- **Create a collaborative atmosphere and culture within the organization.** Leaders set the tone for an organization, but the best ideas often come from lower down in the ranks. Successful transportation reform hinges on encouraging and rewarding ideas, innovation, and initiative. This often means breaking down the rigid hierarchy that is endemic to many DOTs at state, county, and municipal levels. Changing this culture can be as simple as inviting employees to converse with leadership, or recognizing good work among peers. Internal champions are vital to advancing reform.
- **Include stakeholders and partners beyond the agency.** Transportation is no minor issue; it affects housing choice, provides access to education, supports commerce, and ultimately is a key determinant in the long-term strength of a region and its ability to attract and sustain growth. State DOTs, therefore, have a strong incentive to work with other state agencies and outside bodies to extract the greatest possible benefit from their combined efforts. Legislators and executives can help state agencies work more efficiently and effectively by finding common ground between them and supporting the reforms necessary to sustain and improve these vital systems. Housing, development, environment, and other agencies can leverage the resources of each other to accomplish shared goals. This not only builds support across agencies, but also builds trust with voters in the ability of government to collaborate and to coordinate efforts.
- **Break down silos between DOT administrations and across agencies.** States, their transportation agencies, and the leaders within them are all working toward the same objective—a safe system that supports a vital economy and a healthy community. Breaking down silos and establishing a true team dynamic directs resources and energy toward the same end, saving time and money while engineering more innovative solutions.
- **Understand how decisions are made within the agency.** To implement reforms successfully, there must be a commitment to proposed changes that extends beyond the agency leadership level. Making the decision-making processes more transparent and understandable can engender trust among staff and management and promote a greater commitment to accomplishing reforms.
- **Prioritize solutions for reform.** This handbook highlights many strategies for reform and improvement, and it might be tempting to launch several new initiatives at once. This is not advised. Rather, consult with both internal and external stakeholders to strategically choose the challenges/reforms to tackle and the solutions to pursue. Remain focused, and provide the support staff required to implement and deliver the desired results. Remain engaged, celebrate successes, and keep the momentum going—even when reforms must be abandoned and new attempts begun.

## A word from Al Biehler, former Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation

As Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation for eight years, I was responsible for a \$7 billion annual budget, 40,000 miles of roads, 25,000 bridges, and 11,000 employees. Our actions affected not only the DOT, but the entire state. As DOTs across the country face shrinking budgets and higher expectations, I understand the challenges you face and the difficult decisions you must make.

When I became DOT Secretary in 2003, Pennsylvania was in the process of updating its capital improvement program. We had 26 expansion projects with a \$5 billion price tag. At the same time, our roads and bridges were crumbling and we couldn't maintain our infrastructure. After an honest evaluation, we came to a stark realization—we couldn't keep spending money we didn't have on projects that didn't protect our assets. In short, revenue constraints, system conditions, and the changing demands of our economy meant we had to change the way we did business.

Many states have come to this same conclusion: DOTs must change their strategic approach to make smarter investments, to wring more and better performance out of their existing systems, and to critically evaluate the full range of possible future investments. We must focus on those projects that do the most good for the least money.

Through our demonstrated ingenuity and accountability, we must build the trust of our constituents to provide funding levels that meet the transportation needs of our future economies and communities. Accomplishing such a lofty goal starts with adopting innovative solutions and staying up-to-date about best practices nationally. That is why Smart Growth American (SGA) and the State Smart Transportation Initiative (SSTI) created this handbook.

This handbook provides a comprehensive list of reforms that will make a significant difference in your state's transportation system. It gives examples of states that have put these ideas into practice effectively and tells you what you need to do to achieve success. And when you are ready to implement these strategies, SGA and SSTI have resources to assist you.

With 34 reforms outlined in this handbook, where should you start? The short answer: anywhere. The handbook is intended as a guide, not a checklist. Identify and prioritize the reforms that make the most sense for you, based on your goals and desired outcomes. Don't try to take on too many all at once. In Pennsylvania, once we eliminated or reconfigured expansion projects, our first priority was preserving and repairing the roads and bridges we already had. After we addressed those issues, we broadened our focus to include transit, biking, and walking. We took chances and implemented pilot programs to encourage municipalities and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) to experiment with smart transportation projects, and I'm confident our state is better for it.

I encourage you to use this handbook to examine your state's transportation needs and better prioritize solutions moving forward. Some questions to ask yourself along the way:

- How can my department work with other agencies to be most effective?
- What opportunities can I pursue that will help my state create jobs and improve the economy?
- How can I integrate transportation, land use, and economic development decisions in order to maximize the benefit from all three?

- How can I provide travelers and shippers the best access to destinations, at the least cost in terms of dollars, time, and environmental/community impact?

This handbook's ideas will help you answer these questions and many more. It will allow you to transform your transportation system, even in a challenging economy, and add the value your users demand.

Make no mistake, the changes we made in Pennsylvania took time and patience, and—perhaps most important—the input and support of staff and policymakers, but the results were more than worth the effort. Because PennDOT was willing to refocus its priorities, we were able to clearly demonstrate the positive impact that smart transportation can have on economic development, jobs, and sustainability.

I wish you the same success.

Sincerely,

Al Biehler  
Former Secretary  
Pennsylvania Department of Transportation

*A personal postscript: I tip my hat to previous Secretaries Tom Larson, Howard Yerusalem, and Brad Mallory as well as current Secretary Barry Schoch for setting the stage and continuing to make PennDOT a practice leader.*

## Note from the authors

We hope this handbook will be a living document, updated periodically with new and improved policies and practices. We invite reader comments, suggestions and ideas for additional case studies. Direct comments to Roger Millar, PE, AICP, at (406) 544-1963, [rmillar@smartgrowthamerica.org](mailto:rmillar@smartgrowthamerica.org) or Eric Sundquist, at (608) 265-6155, [erics@cow.s.org](mailto:erics@cow.s.org).