

## Wyoming DOT to Halt Hwy. Expansion

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Wyoming transportation officials announced the state will stop expanding highways as a result of financial constraints. The Wyoming Department of Transportation said it will concentrate its resources on maintaining existing highways, although current funding may not keep existing roadways in good repair for long, according to the agency's head.

"We're beginning to look at our transportation system from a maintenance perspective rather than [as] a highway improvement program," WYDOT Director John Cox said, adding that the agency would enter into "kind of a survival mode." Regarding the continued deterioration of the road system, Cox said the move only "staves off the inevitable." Cox said it is vital for the state to locate new state and federal funding.

Other similar changes among state DOT's includes Missouri laying off 1,200 transportation workers and Ohio DOT director Jerry Wray requesting a larger federal funding match. Maryland and Connecticut are turning to higher gas taxes to help funding levels, and Michigan is looking to do the same.

## Voters Nationwide Choose to Pay More for Transit

Posted By [Ryan Holeywell](#) | November 17, 2011

As federal lawmakers debate the future of highway and transit funding, they've found themselves in a peculiar position. The gas tax won't generate enough money to maintain funding for those programs. Yet both parties in Congress, as well as the Obama administration, are opposed to raising gas taxes. Their rationale is that such a move would be wildly unpopular among voters, who are still feeling the effects of the recession.

But it appears they may be underestimating their constituents.

In local elections this year, voters have supported efforts that would increase their own costs and increase their governments' investments in transit projects about 79 percent of the time, according to the [Center for Transportation Excellence](#), which advocates for transit and tracks ballot initiatives on that subject.

Since 2000, the success rate has been 70 percent, meaning that of those votes resulted in increases or renewals of sales and property taxes for transit projects like bus service and light rail.

"We're not talking about a fluke election," says Art Guzzetti, vice president for policy at the American Public Transportation Association. "It's a sustained trend. When you present [voters] a good option to deal with their problems, they will say yes."

To be fair, there's a big distinction between the federal gas tax and local taxes for transit. At the local level, voters know at election time exactly what they're getting for their money, and they can decide whether the investment is worth it. At the federal level, voters pay a gas tax at the point of purchase -- which many people aren't aware of in the first place -- and that that money is distributed to a myriad of programs and projects. Essentially, federal leaders have a tougher case to make, since they can't attach a specific project to the tax. But CTE's research does suggest that voters have a willingness to pay for transportation programs they think are worthy.

Last week, Durham County, N.C. residents approved a new half-cent sales tax expected to generate \$18.3 million annually to improve bus service and bring commuter and light rail to the area. Cincinnati voters rejected a proposal to prohibit the city from spending money on a streetcar project. And voters in Washington state defeated a plan that would allow the state legislature -- instead of a separate commission -- to set tolls. Lawmakers likely would have reduced those tolls.

“Voters do like transportation. They like transit. And they didn’t like an initiative to derail the plan that we had in place,” says Dan Kully, a political consultant that worked to defeat the initiative in Washington, during a presentation this week.

Next year, high profile votes will likely be posed to residents in and around Denver, Oakland and Raleigh. Gaining the most attention is a contest in 10-county Atlanta metro area. This July, voters there will decide whether to create a 1 percent sales tax to fund \$6 billion in transportation improvements. Just over half the revenue would fund transit projects, about 48 percent would fund roads, and the remainder would fund bike and pedestrian paths.

Of course, the plans aren’t always a success. In Avon, Colo., residents overwhelmingly opposed a sales tax increase to buy new buses and improve bus stops that would have generated less than \$1 million a year. Voters in Trumbull County, Ohio widely rejected a property tax to fund their transit system. Now, residents reportedly can’t book rides on that system until further notice.

Still, such cases are outliers, and local leaders who have led successful transportation campaigns say it’s crucial to make it clear to voters that they’re getting value for their money. In 2009, for example, Grand Rapids, Mich. voters rejected a plan to increase property taxes by nearly a third to expand bus service. That’s largely because the plan did little for three of the six communities the transit agency serves. This year, voters approved the measure, which was tweaked to expand service to all six communities.

Voters in Vancouver, Wash. and its surrounding communities recently vote to increase the sales tax that supports C-TRAN, the local transit authority, from 0.5 percent to 0.7 percent. That translates to an extra \$40 to \$50 in costs each year for the average household. Without the favorable vote, the agency would have to reduce its service by a third, says Jeff Hamm, head of C-TRAN. Instead, the agency will now get an extra \$8 million to \$9 million annually.

“Quite frankly, we did not expect to win here,” says Hamm. “We were pleasantly surprised and humbled by the victory.”

Hamm says a vocal minority opposed the tax hike, but voters ultimately showed they value the service, which has many low-income and elderly customers but is also popular among commuters who use its express route to Portland, Ore.

Agency officials pitched the tax hike as a jobs driver, noting that as bad as the economy is right now, things would be even worse if people couldn’t get to work. Ultimately, that message resonated with voters, Hamm says.

And in Stark County, Ohio, residents voted this spring to renew a five-year, .25 percent sales tax that funds the local regional transit authority, which provides bus service primarily to the indigent.

That support didn’t come easily. Kirt Conrad, who heads the transit authority, says the \$11.5 million the tax generates annually represents about 75 percent of its budget. Without a ‘yes’ vote, the transit service would have stopped.

In 2009, Stark County voters repealed a different special-purpose tax, signaling that renewal wouldn't necessarily be automatic. "If you don't make a compelling case to voters, they're going to vote you down," says Conrad. The agency had spent six months on its outreach campaign, and in the years before the vote, the agency grew leaner through layoffs, increased fares and reduces fares, proving to voters that it wasn't just looking for a handout. "You really have to show them you're well-managed and what they're getting for their money," Conrad says.