

Big federal dollars for small state projects aim to get more cars off the roads

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A 60-mile pedestrian and cycling trail in Arkansas, an electric street sweeper in Oregon and truck parking facilities in Florida don't appear to have much in common—let alone any similarity with a conversion of

California highways to toll roads or a roundabout in Michigan.

But all of the projects will be paid for by the Carbon Reduction Program, a five-year, \$6.4 billion federal program to reduce the [tailpipe emissions](#) that contribute to global warming. The program, known as the CRP, was authorized in the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the \$1.2 trillion federal investment in everything from roads and bridges to the electrical grid.

The CRP is small in comparison to, say, the infrastructure law's \$40 billion pledge to fix the nation's bridges. Yet it could be mighty for bringing to life what are known as transportation alternatives, or small-scale infrastructure designed to take cars off the road and therefore reduce emissions. They include sidewalk installation and improvements, pedestrian walkways, bike lanes and trails, and bike share programs.

It takes much less money to make an impact on transportation emissions with such programs, said Kevin Mills, vice president of policy at Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, which advocates for money for walking and bicycling trails and has been keeping a close eye on how the CRP will boost funding for its priorities.

"This program has a big purpose and not a great amount of money given the task before us," Mills said. "What becomes important is that we make the most of what's a fairly modest-sized new program so that we can prove its value and hopefully grow it going forward. That puts a premium on things that will give you a big bang for the buck."

While the broader infrastructure bill was under consideration, many U.S. House Democrats wanted it to devote even more money to climate change-related measures and less to highway projects. After it passed, 16 Republican governors grumbled about an internal Federal Highway Administration memo that encouraged states to emphasize existing

repairs, [public transit](#) and [bike lanes](#) over projects to expand highways.

In the coming weeks, states must submit [carbon reduction](#) strategies that demonstrate how they'll use [federal money](#) to reduce transportation emissions. In their strategies, states will be required to identify specific projects and approaches to reach the goals in their CRP plans, said Elle Segal, an advocacy outreach director at Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. The federal program requires that states explain by Nov. 15 how they'll reduce emissions.

States have some leeway to shift as much as 50% of the money for carbon reduction toward other federally funded transportation projects that don't have an explicit greenhouse gas reduction component. Some states have done just that, to the disappointment of climate activists and progressive transportation planners. (States also can transfer money from those other federal formula programs to the carbon reduction program.)

In some cases, a transfer is a temporary measure and money will shift back; dollars for carbon reduction began flowing to states a year before the carbon reduction strategy plans were due and some states hadn't yet outlined their priorities for cutting emissions.

In Maryland, the state is focusing on three areas to reduce transportation sector emissions, said Deron Lovaas, who leads the Environment and Sustainable Transportation program for the Maryland Department of Transportation. The most pressing strategy, he said, is to increase the number of electric vehicles on the road, beginning with cars, sedans, pickup trucks and SUVs, followed by medium- and heavy-duty vehicles. That includes steering federal money to electrify the vehicle fleet used by state and local governments.

Up next is reducing overall traffic or vehicle miles traveled. That involves an "array of measures," Lovaas said, including investments in

public transportation, such as rail, bus and shuttle service, and making sidewalks and roads safer for bicyclists and pedestrians and those in wheelchairs.

It's critical that states go on the record about what they're doing with their carbon reduction strategies, he said. That will allow states to learn from each other and will provide accountability for how federal money is being spent to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

"It's an important document because carbon reduction from transportation is challenging and requires a multi-year strategy," Lovaas said. "So that's how we're seeing this document. We're seeing it as important not just for informing the Carbon Reduction Program, but also reflective of Maryland's broader strategy to decarbonize transportation."

Many states—including California, Colorado and Massachusetts—already had laws in place that address transportation emissions. Washington's approach to its CRP strategy, for example, builds upon its 2021 State Energy Strategy. In Oregon, the state's Carbon Reduction Strategy evolved from its 2013 plan to reduce carbon emissions by 2050 and a statewide transportation strategy that was updated this year. Statewide greenhouse gas emissions goals are codified in state law and executive order in Oregon, as well.

"We built the carbon reduction program on that strong base of actions," said Brian Hurley, a mitigation program manager with the Oregon Department of Transportation. "We did not have to start from scratch."

A description by the Minnesota Department of Transportation may best reflect a hard truth in many parts of the country when it comes to carbon reduction policies, regardless of political affiliation: "Land use patterns and unsafe, inconvenient alternatives make driving alone the most

convenient choice for many Minnesotans. Cars in Minnesota are mostly powered by fossil fuels, which emit carbon pollution and other air pollutants."

"Some [states](#) are actually way ahead of us federally, in terms of their level of climate ambition and the creativity that they've brought to this and the steps they've taken," Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg told The Washington Post last year. "Others, we're pulling along and really working to encourage them."

The Carbon Reduction Program is a five-year, \$6.4 billion federal program to reduce the tailpipe emissions that contribute to global warming.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican, this summer vetoed a budget provision that would have allowed state agencies to seek federal money through a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency grant to improve energy efficiency in buildings. But Florida hasn't turned down \$320.4 million in CRP transportation funding the state will receive over five years.

In its Carbon Reduction Strategy, Florida plans to call for reducing single-occupancy vehicle trips as well as for making it easier to use vehicles or modes of travel with lower emissions. The state's strategy will also call for using construction techniques with lower emissions.

Florida will use \$46 million to build 26 truck parking areas with commercial EV charging stations and other amenities. Safe places for truckers to rest have long been at a premium, but the growth in e-commerce has put even more trucks on the road, further straining the parking supply. And without a place to stop for federally mandated rest periods, truckers spend additional time on the road looking for safe places to park, which means more time spewing CO₂ out of tailpipes.

Truck parking shortages are considered a "national safety concern" by the Federal Highway Administration's Office of Freight Management and Operations.

Florida is also planning to invest big in its SUN Trails system, Huiwei Shen, the chief planner at the Florida Department of Transportation, said during a Rails-to-Trails Conservancy seminar earlier this year. The non-motorized, shared-use paths received a one-time infusion of \$200 million from the state legislature this year.

"It's a great time for trails in Florida," Shen said. "It would contribute greatly towards the vision of a statewide interconnected trail system in Florida, and we want to be the No. 1 trail destination internationally."

In Oregon, the state has \$82 million to spend over five years. It set aside \$13 million of that for projects in smaller cities and rural areas and for tribes; the federal program requires 65% of the money to go to larger metropolitan areas. Since the bulk of the money will go to parts of the state with more congestion, the state DOT wanted to help smaller communities make some progress on reducing [carbon](#) emissions, too, said Rye Baerg, a climate program coordinator with the Oregon Department of Transportation.

Among the projects are e-bike lending libraries, solar streetlights and even electric-powered street cleaners sized specifically to clean pedestrian and bike paths so that they're safer and therefore more attractive to users.

"We had a lot of counties, a lot of small cities, interested in charging and those types of things," Baerg said. "I think that we saw a lot of interest in our first round of call for projects and I expect to see even more interest now that people know what types of things we're funding and have a better sense of what the program is next year."

The small changes add up, said Lovaas, with the Maryland transportation department. For example, if Maryland invests in a new transit line using Carbon Reduction Program money, it can multiply the effect of municipal or state policies that encourage transit-oriented development, Lovaas said. Invest in safe street programs, he added, and it reduces the number of trips people make by car and reduces their emissions.

"So for the short trips, you actually can replace them with walking or biking or rolling or some non-motorized mode," he said. "You add all that together and you get a pretty big effect."

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