

The National Beat

October 17th, 2024

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Federal Updates

On October 17th, DOE’s Energy Loan Programs Office tentatively committed up to \$670.6 million to Aspen Aerogels Georgia to boost the manufacturing of electric vehicle battery safety components. The loan will support the construction of a facility, which will produce thermal barriers designed to prevent EV battery overheating and fires. [Read more here.](#)

On October 16th, DOE’s Loan Programs Office announced nearly \$3 billion in conditional commitments to support sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) projects. This marks the office's first financing efforts for SAF production, with loans tentatively awarded to Gevo and Montana Renewables. Gevo will receive a \$1.46 billion loan guarantee to build a corn starch-to-jet fuel facility in South Dakota. Montana Renewables will receive \$1.44 billion to expand its facility. [Read more here.](#)

On October 8th, Politico reported that former President Donald Trump is assembling a transportation advisory team composed of GOP congressional allies and officials from his previous administration, as he prepares for November. Notable figures include former FAA Acting Administrator Dan Elwell, T&I Committee Chair Rep. Garret Graves (R-LA), and Rep. Troy Nehls (R-TX) who have provided insights to Trump's transition team. Rep. Graves and potentially Rep. Nehls are rumored as potential picks for DOT Secretary should former President Donald Trump win the election. [Read more here.](#) (Please email Katie at keconomou@ampo.org for assistance, if you are not able to access the Politico article).

On October 4th, Eno reported that It’s possible that Congress could return early from its recess to vote on additional aid for Hurricane Helene recovery. While there’s no official decision yet, the significant infrastructure damage, particularly in North Carolina and Tennessee, and the strain on federal disaster relief funds could prompt an earlier return. With major road closures and the need for immediate repairs, as well as the limited remaining funds in the FHWA’s Emergency Relief program, legislators may feel pressure to act sooner to ensure adequate funding for recovery efforts. [Read more here](#) and view [Eno’s report here.](#) (Please email Katie at keconomou@ampo.org for assistance, if you are not able to access the Eno report).

On October 1st, a federal judge paused a lawsuit from the rail industry challenging California's emissions rules, which aim to phase out diesel locomotives. The judge ruled that the U.S. EPA's pending decision on California's waiver request will significantly influence the case. The court also rejected a part of the lawsuit concerning locomotive idling rules, but the final decision now rests on EPA's ruling. If approved, the rule could be upheld under the Clean Air Act, potentially setting a precedent for stricter locomotive emissions standards. [Read more here.](#)

USDOT

On October 15th, USDOT celebrated the creation of over 1.7 million construction and manufacturing jobs, as well as 700,000 transportation sector jobs, since the start of the IIJA. There have been more than 60,000 infrastructure projects that are underway, including critical updates to bridges, roads, ports, and rail systems. [Read more here.](#)

On October 10th, FRA announced over \$108 million in grants through the Special Transportation Circumstances (STC) Grant Program to improve rail safety and strengthen supply chains in rural communities across Alaska, South Dakota, and Wyoming. These nine projects will enhance short line railroads, upgrade grade crossings, and improve the reliability and efficiency of rail operations. [Read more here.](#)

On October 7th, PHMSA proposed a new rule aimed at simplifying shipping processes for truck drivers, improving supply chains, and reducing energy transportation costs. The proposed rule modernizes hazardous material transportation regulations while maintaining safety across highway, rail, and vessel modes. The updates include simplified hazard communication for fuel transport, streamlined tank car design reviews, and the use of new inspection technologies for cargo tanks. [Read more here.](#)

On October 5th, FHWA announced \$100 million in Emergency Relief funds for North Carolina to address road and bridge damage caused by Hurricane Helene. The funds will help the NC DOT expedite emergency repairs and restore critical transportation routes. Secretary Buttigieg emphasized ongoing commitment to supporting recovery efforts in North Carolina, with additional federal resources to follow. Hurricane Helene caused significant damage, including flash flooding and bridge collapses, particularly along I-40. [Read more here.](#)

On October 5th, FHWA announced the release of \$32 million in Emergency Relief funding for the Tennessee Department of Transportation to support emergency repairs caused by Hurricane Helene. The funds will assist in reopening critical routes, including I-40 and I-26, which were severely impacted by roadway washouts and bridge damage. Additional funding will be available as recovery efforts progress. [Read more here.](#)

On October 4th, FHWA announced the release of \$2 million in Emergency Relief funding to the SC DOT for immediate repair work following Hurricane Helene. The funding will be used to reopen and maintain critical routes, including US-276 in Greenville County, which is essential for emergency communications and operations. [Read more here.](#)

On October 4th, FTA announced a \$149.9 million grant to the Regional Transportation District (RTD) in Denver, Colorado, to support the construction of the city's first bus rapid transit (BRT) line along East Colfax Avenue. The 8.6-mile BRT will provide faster, more frequent service, reducing travel times for

riders by about 30 minutes per day. The line will feature dedicated bus-only lanes and operate 24 hours a day. [Read more here](#) and [check out DRCOG's efforts with BRT](#).

On October 4th, FHWA secured a commitment from Alabama DOT to address stormwater impacts and flooding complaints in the Shiloh community along US Highway 84. As part of a Voluntary Resolution Agreement, Alabama DOT will construct a drainage project to mitigate stormwater runoff caused by highway widening. FHWA will continue to support the community with technical assistance and will host future convenings to ensure ongoing progress. [Read more here](#).

On October 2nd, FRA announced the execution of a \$3.8 billion Federal-State Partnership Grant agreement with the Gateway Development Corporation for the Hudson Tunnel project, obligating an initial \$1.9 billion. This marks a significant milestone in federal funding for the project, part of the \$12 billion federal contribution. Concurrently, the FRA solicited proposals for an additional \$1 billion in FSP grants for projects outside the Northeast Corridor, with applications due by December 16, 2024. [Read more here](#).

On October 1st, FHWA reported a 9.6% annual increase in highway construction costs, with the National Highway Construction Cost Index (for Q1 of 2024 showing a 2.4% increase from Q4 of 2023. This brings the NHCCI to 3.1908, indicating that construction costs have more than tripled since the index's inception in 2003. While costs rose rapidly after 2020, they may now be slowing. Concrete costs drove 40% of this recent increase, as FHWA explores research into inflation drivers such as supply chain challenges and demand. [Read more here](#).

On October 1st, FRA finalized a new rule to enhance stakeholder participation in accident and incident investigations. The rule ensures that key stakeholders, including railroad carriers and labor organizations, can contribute to FRA investigations by providing insights, submitting information, and accessing relevant investigative data. This collaborative approach aims to improve investigation outcomes and overall rail safety. [Read more here](#).

On October 1st, FTA published updated guidance for several programs, including the Award Management Circular and specific program circulars. The updates consolidate information from related documents and incorporate provisions from the last two congressional authorizations. Revised circulars include Award Management Requirements, Rural Areas Formula Grants Program, Enhanced Mobility for Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities Program, and Urbanized Areas Formula Grant Programs. FTA also issued a "Dear Colleague" letter detailing changes from updates to the Uniform Administrative Requirements and outlining upcoming training opportunities. [Learn more here](#) and read the "[Dear Colleague](#)" letter [here](#).

On October 1st, FHWA announced \$62 billion in Fiscal Year 2025 funding to all states, D.C., and Puerto Rico through 12 formula programs. The funds will support infrastructure improvements, including road, bridge, and tunnel projects. This marks a \$18.8 billion increase in formula program funding compared to pre-IIJA levels. [Read more here](#) and [view apportionments here](#). ***Read analysis on FY 2025 apportionments below in the October 3rd National Beat newsletter's section titled: "Policy Analysis: Apportionment of Federal-Aid Highway Program."***

Congressional Hearings, Meetings, & Markups

Both the House and Senate are on Recess until November 12th.

- On September 25th, the House T&I Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management held a hearing to examine the role and effectiveness of building codes in mitigating against disasters. [Watch here](#).
- On September 25th, the House T&I Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation held a hearing on investments to support Coast Guard personnel. [Watch here](#).
- On September 25th, the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee a nominations hearing considering three candidates for key transportation positions. [Watch hearing here](#).

National Transportation News

On October 14th, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed a bill aimed at addressing soaring gas prices by granting the state more regulatory power over oil refiners. The new law, ABX 2 1, allows the CA Energy Commission to require refiners to store more gas and share resupply plans to prevent price spikes caused by maintenance issues or low supplies. Newsom emphasized the need to curb oil companies' profit-driven practices, while the oil industry argued the bill could backfire and increase costs. The law takes effect in January 2025, with regulators set to decide on potential refinements to these measures by the end of the year. [Read more here](#).

On October 4th, Eno hosted a webinar discussing private contracting for transit services, highlighting key insights from its report, *Success Factors in Private Contracting for Public Transportation*. The report shows that private contracting can improve services and lower costs when public transit agencies and private firms collaborate effectively. Panelists, including representatives RTC of Southern Nevada, emphasized the importance of positive public-private relationships and careful contract design. They recommended thorough reviews before issuing RFPs and shared examples of innovation in fare technology and zero-emission vehicles. [Read more here](#).

On October 4th, dockworkers at US East Coast and Gulf Coast ports suspended their strike. A tentative agreement on wages was reached, and the Master Contract has been extended until January 15, 2025, allowing more time to negotiate other outstanding issues. This suspension is crucial for ongoing hurricane recovery efforts and ensuring supply chain stability. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg also commended the agreement, noting its positive impact on workers, shippers, and the economy. [Read more here](#).

Following hurricane Milton, Florida's transportation hubs are beginning to recover, with Tampa's airport and major bridges starting to reopen. Although Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport sustained significant damage, with parts of its roof destroyed, other airports, including Tampa International, are aiming to resume operations soon. Port Tampa Bay lost power but reported no significant damage, while major bridges in the area have reopened. [Read more here](#).

NOFOs

Learn about federal grants available to MPOs and key NOFO information in AMPO's NOFO Tracker ([access here](#)). The tracker is also available on [amp.org](#) under the "Resources" drop down.

New (MPO Eligible)

- FHWA's [Low Carbon Transportation Materials \(LCTM\) Program](#)
 - **Description:** This program supports the use of low-carbon materials in transportation projects to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Applications are due by November 25th; MPOs are eligible to apply.
 - FHWA will be hosting an informational webinar on the LCTM program on September 25th at 2:00 PM (ET) ([register here](#)).
 - **Deadline:** 11/25/2024

Upcoming NOFOs (MPO Eligible)

- FHWA's [Promoting Resilient Operations for Transformative, Efficient, and Cost-saving Transportation \(PROTECT\)](#): Expected October 2024
- OST's [Regional Infrastructure Accelerators Demonstration \(RIA\) Program](#): Expected October 2024
- FTA's [All Stations Accessibility Program](#): Expected November 2024
- OST's [Rural and Tribal Assistance Pilot Program](#): Expected November 2024
- Maritime Administration's [Port Infrastructure Development Program \(PIDP\)](#): Expected December 2024
- USDOT's [Reduction of Truck Emissions at Port Facilities \(RTEPF\) Program](#): Expected December 2024

Reauthorization and AMPO's Approach

Visit AMPO's reauthorization [webpage](#) to learn more about our legislative priorities and read our new survey reports and issue papers. As reauthorization nears, AMPO is working closely with policymakers and partners to prioritize MPO concerns. Our strategies include coalition building, grassroots mobilization, data-driven advocacy, and strategic communication to ensure our collective voice is heard.

We encourage MPOs to share stories that highlight the critical work they do and emphasize the importance of adequate resources and authority in effective transportation planning. These stories will help demonstrate the real-world impact MPOs have on communities and the significant role transportation funding plays in driving positive change. [Share your story here!](#)

We're looking forward to sharing more information in the coming weeks with our members and industry partners as we move towards reauthorization. If you have any questions, please reach out to Katie Economou at keconomou@ampo.org.