

## TRANSPORTATION

# Critics question influx of transportation funding and effect on emissions

They say the plan would support more highway expansion and leave little opportunity for public discussion

By [Brian Amaral](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 15, 2022, 4:55 p.m.

PROVIDENCE — Democratic state Rep. Lauren Carson's constituents in Newport care about fixing crumbling roads and bridges. But living on Aquidneck Island, they also care about climate change.

It's part of the reason why she was pushed for last year's Act on Climate law, which set binding targets for emissions reductions. And it's also why she's concerned that the state is moving ahead with hundreds of millions in federal transportation funding without properly considering the effect these projects would have on emissions.

"There are a lot of people that are watching," Carson said in an interview. "We must bring implementation of this law into the public dialogue, about everything we do going forward. And that has not been done."

The concerns that climate and transit activists are now raising about the state's transportation funding plans center on a veritable alphabet of acronyms and abbreviations.

On Thursday, a state transportation advisory committee (the TAC) will vote on whether to recommend that the state planning council (the state's designated metropolitan planning organization, or MPO) make changes to the state's long-term transportation funding plans (the STIP). The state Department of Transportation (often called RIDOT, pronounced RYE-dot) has asked the TAC to recommend changes to the STIP to account for hundreds of millions in federal funding through last year's federal transportation bonanza (sometimes called IJJA, sometimes the BIL).

Whatever you call it, the federal law will bring billions to Rhode Island — \$500 million just in the first five years for repair projects, nevermind money to build new things. The TAC and MPO are expected to approve the spending shifts, which would then become state policy. (There will be no more acronyms.)

Climate and transit advocacy groups, including the Green Energy Consumers Alliance, Grow Smart RI and the Providence Streets Coalition, have raised concerns about the plan. They say it's being advanced in a way that will limit public discussion. And they have much to discuss.

"It feels like they're trying to ram this through," said Mal Skowron of the Green Energy Consumers Alliance.

Transportation is the source of climate-warming gasses in Rhode Island. Critics like John Flaherty, deputy director of Grow Smart RI and a member of the panel that will vote on the changes Thursday, said the plan would support more highway expansion.

"It's really more business as usual," Flaherty said.

He did not mean it as a compliment.

The state Department of Transportation, meanwhile, says that on the substance, climate groups have their facts wrong.

"Not one of the projects funded by this act are 'highway expansion,'" spokesman Charles St. Martin said.

They are all, St. Martin said, projects that would repair, rehabilitate and reconstruct failing bridges and crumbling roadways, projects "designed to keep Rhode Islanders safe."

Critics pointed to projects like the proposed Route 95 and Route 4 interchange, which would involve building new ramps. St. Martin said the state isn't going to use funding from last year's federal transportation law for that project. Instead its inclusion in the Department of Transportation's plans serves as a placeholder for the state to try to get grants for it.

"One of the greatest benefits of this project will be to provide a quicker way for large commercial vehicles to get to Quonset as they carry equipment to help build the wind farm which will be a major source of clean energy," St. Martin said. "It will also reduce congestion and air pollution on local roads as it eliminates the need for vehicles to idle at traffic signals."

The 487-page document that lays out the Department of Transportation's plans does not include the word "climate."

But, St. Martin said, good roads reduce emissions by giving people a quicker and safer way to get where they're going. (Environmental groups [are skeptical](#), to say the least.) St. Martin also said the Department of Transportation wasn't trying to limit public comment, as critics have said. It's pushing the proposal forward in a way that it has to under the law, he said.

Critics of the Department of Transportation, however, point west for a better way of doing business: The Colorado Transportation Commission recently passed a rule requiring that the state's planning organizations account for the climate effect of proposed projects, and to offset them in some cases. That could reportedly steer billions away from highway expansion and [toward greener projects](#).

"That's what we absolutely have to do," said Liza Burkin of the Providence Streets Coalition.

Carson, the state rep behind Act on Climate, likewise believes the Colorado model would be the right way to go.

The law she championed — she called it "just the greatest accomplishment of my career" — has mandates, not simply goals: The state shall reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to

45 percent of the 1990 levels by 2030, and get to net-zero by 2050.

Will the proposed changes to state transportation funding now in the works help or hurt efforts to start hitting those targets? Carson isn't sure, but her concern is that the state doesn't know, either.

"We don't know the answer to that," Carson said. "We do know that if you build roads, people will come."

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