We envision a country where no matter where you live, or who you are, you can enjoy living in a place that is healthy, prosperous, and resilient.

Smart growth is the affordable, equitable, and sustainable path to recovery and prosperity.

Dear President-elect Biden:

Congratulations on your successful campaign! Though our country faces serious interrelated challenges of racial inequity, the climate crisis, and an economic recession caused by the COVID-19 public health crisis, we also have an enormous opportunity. The COVID-19 crisis has shone a light on structural inequities in federal programs, yet it has also illuminated the path forward. But these challenges cannot be considered in a piecemeal fashion. Only through a holistic approach that connects transportation, housing, and infrastructure policy can we unlock our economic potential, tackle climate change and promote racial equity. An interdisciplinary strategy will provide Americans with freedom of transportation choice, access to affordable housing, and healthy communities—while providing a foundation for fiscally responsible and sustainable growth. In this document, we recommend a suite of actions and legislation that will help us make meaningful progress on these goals.

Land use and spread out development patterns have directly led to more and longer trips for people and goods and more land and energy being consumed for development, contributing to racial inequity, increasing greenhouse gas emissions, and limiting access to economic opportunity. We must look past the approach laid out in the 1956 Highway Act that continues in today’s program. The challenges and priorities of the mid-20th century are out of date and sometimes at odds with those of the 2020s. We should update 70 years of “tradition” in how we invest and develop and chart a new path. Today, people who cannot drive or afford a vehicle have difficulty participating in the economy and traveling safely. Pedestrian and cyclist deaths are increasing, with Black and Hispanic Americans dying and being injured at disproportionately higher rates. Sixty percent of transit riders are people of color, and these riders are disadvantaged by a nationwide underinvestment in transit and unsafe pedestrian conditions. Transportation represents the largest share of carbon emissions, and those emissions are rising because most Americans have no choice but to drive even very short distances—and the federal transportation program supports investments that require increases in driving.

Now is the time for change enabling us to build back better. While land use and development is traditionally considered a state and local issue, federal policy strongly incentivizes state and local decision making and has directly contributed to our current circumstances.

3 Carbon Pollution from Transportation. Environmental Protection Agency. www.epa.gov/transportation-air-pollution-and-climate-change/carbon-pollution-transportation
As the bedrock of our nation’s economy, affecting Americans each and every day, transportation is critical to addressing our environmental, racial, and economic crises. We must empower Americans with the freedom of affordable, reliable, and sustainable transportation choices, allowing people to safely and conveniently travel through our communities and access essential jobs and services. **Simply pumping more money into outdated policies will fail to meet this moment.** We must fundamentally update the transportation program for 21st century challenges, like prioritizing maintaining our transportation system while making it safer and ensuring that all people are better connected to jobs and opportunity.

Additionally, neighborhoods that are inclusive, healthy, prosperous, and resilient are very rare, accelerating a decades-long housing affordability crisis. Despite the enormous demand for walkable, resilient communities, the federal government—the largest single investor in the U.S. real estate—continues to maintain a de facto national housing policy that favors and heavily subsidizes sprawling development patterns, increasing driving and associated emissions and putting people in places farther from jobs and necessities, increasing their transportation expenses. A 2013 report found that the U.S. federal government annually spends or commits over $450 billion in the U.S. real estate market through direct expenditures, tax and loan commitments.4 A majority of those funds are directed to single family homeownership in car-dependent, suburban communities that are most vulnerable to climate change.

We must recognize that current federal subsidized housing policies are both environmentally and fiscally unsustainable, requiring other enormous investments to maintain the infrastructure required to service them when located far from jobs and other daily needs. We must fundamentally reform federal housing policy because it is not enough to eliminate policies and industry practices that prevent Americans—particularly low-income Americans and Black and brown homebuyers—from obtaining quality housing in sought-after neighborhoods. We must proactively dedicate resources to retrofit and fortify existing neighborhoods before communities are displaced by the effects of climate change. This will require the reform of mid-20th century policies and the adoption of new policies that place housing in the most efficient locations and consider the transportation costs for those who live there to encourage racial and socioeconomic inclusivity in communities of opportunity.

**Climate change and equity must be addressed together**

It is essential to acknowledge the inseparable relationship between climate change and equity, and that the best strategies to improve the built environment to address one challenge also address the other. The policies governing the last 70 years of federal transportation and land use have resulted in increased pedestrian fatalities and poor health outcomes caused by dangerous, high-speed roads. Low-income communities and communities of color are more likely to suffer from asthma or other respiratory disorders because of where roads are built. Market demand for connected, walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods continues to significantly outpace supply, making those neighborhoods unaffordable to even the middle class, much less those that can not afford a car.

The good news is that we can make a significant dent in the growth of emissions simply by satisfying the pent-up market demand for affordable homes in the kinds of walkable, connected neighborhoods that are both environmentally and fiscally sustainable. We must recognize that to the extent that federal subsidies for own-homeownership and single-family housing are designed to benefit suburban sprawl, they are a significant obstacle to climate and racial equity. We must proactively dedicate resources to retrofit and fortify existing neighborhoods before communities are displaced by the effects of climate change. This will require the reform of mid-20th century policies and the adoption of new policies that place housing in the most efficient locations and consider the transportation costs for those who live there to encourage racial and socioeconomic inclusivity in communities of opportunity.

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https://smartgrowthamerica.org/resources/federal-involvement-in-real-estate-a-call-for-examination/
communities where residents drive less each day. Providing these more affordable homes would help make the transition to a lower carbon economy in a way that doesn’t place a heavier burden on those with less means. Solutions that allow people to get around outside of the car can reduce emissions in the near term, and they come with co-benefits, like saving money on transportation, more physical activity, and access to necessities for people without a car.

A detailed description of the relationship between land use, transportation, and climate change, and specific policy recommendations can be found here: www.t4america.org/maps-tools/driving-down-emissions/. Complementary policies to invest in city and suburban transportation can be found here: https://transitcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/20.03_GND-Transit_use_v4.pdf. Finally, a detailed overview of strategies to improve health and equity can be found here: https://thriving.us/.

Our recommendations are designed to achieve the following outcomes:

1. Improve racial equity
2. Respond to the urgent threat of climate change
3. Promote fiscal responsibility

Below are policy recommendations from Smart Growth America (SGA) for the incoming Biden administration. It includes recommendations from programs under SGA’s umbrella, including Transportation for America (T4America), LOCUS: Responsible Real Estate Developers and Investors, and the National Complete Streets Coalition. The guide includes two sections: 1) Executive Actions in the first 100 days, and 2) Medium- and long-term initiatives in consultation with Congress.

Executive actions in the first 100 days

1. Climate change and environmental justice
   - Reduce emissions from transportation by re-establishing the greenhouse gas (GHG) performance measure for transportation that the Trump administration repealed, with annual state ratings.
   - Provide guidance for transportation agencies to measure GHG at the project level.
   - Leveraging disaster relief powers, instruct the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to identify the most vulnerable residents for climate change and environmental contamination and provide immediate preemptive relocation assistance to residents into communities of opportunity that are healthy, resilient and prosperous.
   - Conduct a legal review of state constitutions and statutes to determine where true barriers exist to spending local taxes on bike, pedestrian and transit facilities, and recommend incentives for states to remove such barriers.
   - Re-establish the Federal Interagency Working Group on Brownfields to address brownfields cleanup and redevelopment issues in a more coordinated approach and to link environmental protection with economic development and community revitalization.
   - Improve community public health by instructing HHS, DOE, and EPA to better coordinate technical assistance to increase the capacity of disadvantaged communities and communities of color to create Brownfields to Healthfields (B2H) projects, such as
healthcare facilities, healthy food outlets including farmers markets, and urban agriculture including community and school gardens.

2. **Equity**
   - Prioritize federal-local partnerships by establishing a new Office of Community Mobilization, an interagency and intergovernmental office dedicated to building federal-local partnerships that advance public-private projects to address climate, public health, racial, and economic disparities.
   - Require all federal agencies to issue guidance on measuring how investments impact racial and economic equity, and to use this guidance as a criterion for discretionary grant programs.
   - Require federal agencies to issue guidance on identifying communities with infrastructure that creates barriers to mobility (such as highways that slice through a community), measuring the degree of harm to that community, and providing incentives and prioritizing resources to address those disparities by removing infrastructure barriers or creating new connectivity.

3. **Safety**
   - Improve safety by eliminating negative safety targets. Require the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to issue guidance to states and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), instructing them not to set negative safety goals that target an annual increase in pedestrian and cyclist fatalities.
   - Collect useful data on death and injury on roadways by requiring FHWA and NHTSA to collect locations of all collisions resulting in death or serious injury (highlighting those involving cyclists and pedestrians), and produce a detailed map of an annual High Injury Network.
   - Improve vehicle safety by requiring NHTSA to revise the New Car Assessment Program to take into account the risk that automobile design poses to pedestrians and cyclists and the visibility of pedestrians (particularly children and people using wheelchairs and mobility-assistive devices) to the human driver.
   - Improve safety for all road users by requiring FHWA to analyze the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) and identify any standards that are hostile to pedestrians, and update the MUTCD to eliminate standard that are already known to be hostile to pedestrians such as the 85th percentile rule for setting speed limits.
   - Require the DOT to issue guidance clarifying enforcement of section 23USC 109(m) "protection of nonmotorized transportation traffic" that prohibits federal approval of projects that harm bike and pedestrian safety.
   - Require FHWA to update the Highway Capacity Manual to improve standards for pedestrians and cyclists which are based on accurate measures of safety and the perception of safety, including the level of traffic stress and crossing delays as opposed to volume and capacity.
   - Provide states with the capacity to improve safety by requiring FHWA to collect and circulate best practices from across the country. This could include the MassDOT engineering directive on bike, pedestrian, and transit on state highways, for example.

4. **Update modeling to achieve desired outcomes**
   - Help transportation agencies measure access to jobs and essential services by directing research funds to create a national Geographic Information System (GIS)-based resource that allows transportation agencies to measure current levels of access to jobs and services by all modes of travel and assess the impact of planned projects.
○ Analyze and update all transportation models to assess and improve accuracy. This includes issuing guidance on how to measure short trips (such as those made by biking, walking, and driving) and induced demand for driving, and requiring transportation agencies to review the accuracy of their models by comparing past projections with actual outcomes and updating the models when there are discrepancies. DOT should further clarify that MPOs are not required to use demand models to develop transportation improvement plans (TIPs).

5. Access to federal funds
○ So that rural and struggling communities can complete for federal funds, DOT should simplify applications for discretionary programs such as the Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) program by creating an online application and benefit-cost analysis (BCA) process so that small, rural and limited-capacity agencies can more easily apply.
○ Create a streamlined Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (TIFIA) and Railroad Rehabilitation and Improvement Financing (RRIF) online application similar to conventional lenders where the applicant is able to submit project description, credit, financial and information and documentation and receive a pre-approval determination.

6. Technical guidance
○ DOT should update its value of time guidance to only value time saved in a whole trip, rather than assuming that time savings due to faster vehicle speeds along part of the trip means a faster trip, especially when some tactics for increasing speeds also lengthens trips.
○ Stop requiring transportation agencies to make 20-year traffic projections as part of project justification. Allow projects to be built only using traffic projection horizons that the agency can demonstrate it can accurately predict.
○ DOT should issue guidance clarifying the appropriate use of the common transportation design standard known as level of service (LOS), taking into account the impacts on induced demand, climate change, equity, and health outcomes.
○ Establish a location efficiency and equitable development scoring criteria for agencies to apply to decisions involving location of new facilities, particularly those that serve the public.

7. Passenger rail
○ Review the Amtrak Board of Directors and assess the balance of the board with respect to whether or not members have a demonstrated record of support for passenger rail and if the board includes representatives of the long distance, state-supported, and Northeast Corridor routes, as well as civic and elected leaders from local communities served by the existing network.
○ Make a statement of support for the existing national network of state-supported and long distance routes as essential connections for people in smaller and rural communities.
○ Direct the FRA to convene potential regional rail commissions—modeled after the Southern Rail Commission—to begin creating institutions capable of quickly building out new and expanded regional rail systems.

● Community development and housing
○ Instruct FHFA to establish a pilot "housing recapture and reposition" program, which would buy failing market rate units to create long term affordable housing.
○ Establish a “race to the top” for affordable housing production by encouraging local communities to remove exclusionary zoning laws.
○ Revive and strengthen fair housing enforcement and reinstate the Obama administration’s Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing Rule and Disparate Impact Rule.
○ Extend an eviction moratorium for economically distressed and "rapidly changing" communities near transit and direct HUD to issue COVID-19 emergency funding programmatic waivers to provide immediate tenant and landlord rent relief.

○ To help communities meet the pent-up demand for affordable housing and businesses in walkable, resilient communities and accelerate an equitable economic recovery and increase revenues for budget-constrained public transportation agencies, the Biden administration should establish a national council on equitable transit-oriented development (TOD) communities, led by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), in partnership with DOT, EPA, the Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Economic Development Administration (EDA), that promotes and coordinates federal investments and actions to support equitable TOD and community revitalization projects that leads to more mixed-income housing, new revenue streams for budget-constrained public transportation agencies, climate change mitigation and a stronger and sustainable COVID-19 economic recovery.

○ Instruct DOT to immediately deploy $20 billion of unused RRIF TOD funds to increase funding for affordable housing and equitable transit-oriented development.

○ In order to reduce the overall cost of living to residents, HUD should integrate proximity to transportation and walkable places into its location scoring criteria across all housing programs.

○ To reduce the cost of infrastructure and essential services, federal agencies should be instructed to conduct fiscal or impact analyses that assess the effects of their programmatic and funding requirements on affordable housing development in different communities across the country.

○ To address racial wealth inequities, federal agencies should conduct racial wealth audits of federal housing-related programs to assess whether these programs affirmatively contribute to reducing racial wealth inequities.

○ Reinstate and expand President Obama’s Ladders of Opportunity Initiative.

Medium and long-term initiatives in consultation with Congress

1. **Economic stimulus:** The economic collapse brought on by the spread of COVID-19 has necessitated urgent action to protect our economy. Any equitable and sustainable recovery must prioritize emergency steps required to avert economic disaster and focus on catalyzing a long-lasting recovery in the wake of this prolonged crisis. But we must invest wisely to provide a foundation for long-term economic growth. Funds should go to investments that create the most jobs for each dollar spent, build lasting economic prosperity, and ultimately help all Americans have the opportunity to live in a place that is healthy, prosperous, and resilient. Our detailed recommendations for any economic stimulus can be found here: [https://smartgrowthamerica.org/resources/emergency-stabilization-economic-recovery-recommendations/](https://smartgrowthamerica.org/resources/emergency-stabilization-economic-recovery-recommendations/)

2. **Surface transportation authorization:** Reforming our nation’s transportation system is necessary to reduce emissions that contribute to climate change and harm public health. Transportation is the single largest source of greenhouse gases (GHG), with the majority of these emissions coming from driving. While electric vehicles (EVs) and vehicle efficiency standards are essential, they are not sufficient to meet emissions reduction goals. Neither will these technologies improve access to jobs and services for those who cannot afford to...
own or operate a car, nor will they improve safety or reduce congestion. Providing safe and convenient ways for people to travel through their communities using shorter or fewer car trips and other modes of transportation is essential to addressing these challenges and supporting our economic recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. Further, despite significant investment, our infrastructure maintenance backlog has continued to grow. To recover and grow America requires high quality infrastructure, and this begins with fixing our existing assets.

Any surface transportation authorization should 1) prioritize maintenance, 2) design for safety over speed, and 3) focus on improving access to jobs and services for everyone, including those who drive and those who don’t. The House of Representatives included these policies as part of the INVEST in America Act. This legislation starts the work of connecting transportation funding to the outcomes communities need from their transportation systems. A surface transportation authorization should also begin to give the same amount of money to transit as it does to highways and provide operating support for public transit agencies. Our detailed recommendations can be found here: https://t4america.org/reauthorization/.

3. Housing finance and government-sponsored enterprise (GSE) reform: The federal government, through numerous programs including Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, the Federal Housing Administration, the Home Mortgage Interest Deduction, and others, currently exerts tremendous influence on housing. Despite this substantial federal involvement in the market, Black home ownership rates are falling and housing prices and rental rates are outpacing gains in income. In many booming markets, long-time residents and businesses are forced to flee rising costs of living, while middle-income households cannot find housing they can afford. Unaffordable housing is one of the greatest barriers to economic prosperity. Current federal programs miss opportunities to address these problems and, in some cases, exacerbate them. The effect of these dynamics is often felt most acutely in the places where low- and middle-income households are experiencing the greatest economic stress: in hot job markets with high housing costs. These markets are often where the widest range of new jobs are being created and where people seeking opportunity would most likely migrate. Historically, people have bettered their conditions by moving to communities of opportunity. Persistently high housing costs prevent that.

Any housing and GSE reform package must: 1) support balanced housing choices in suburbs, cities, and rural communities, 2) reinvest in America’s existing communities and neighborhoods, 3) provide a safety net for American families, and 4) help more Americans reach the middle class.

4. Regular appropriations: Robust and predictable funding is critical for discretionary affordable housing, community development and transportation programs such as CDBG, HOME and BUILD, the national and Northeast Corridor passenger rail networks, the public transit Capital Investment Grant (CIG) program, the Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvement (CRISI) program, and the Restoration and Enhancement (R&E) Program. Without such funding, local communities are unable to maximize these programs to improve mobility and access to jobs and opportunities.
Conclusion

Money alone cannot rectify structural inequities in the built environment. Instead we must reform and better utilize the vast quantities of direct spending, tax credits, loan programs, formula funds, and financing that already exist, and create targeted new programs when necessary—even in a stimulus bill.

As the new administration looks for opportunities to make the economy work better for everyone, address racial inequities, and respond to climate change, it’s important to remember the large role of housing, land use, and transportation in determining household costs, access to opportunity, wealth accumulation, and the amount of our carbon emissions. The federal government has enormous opportunities to help low- and middle-income Americans enjoy the economic progress that the top half of wage earners have experienced for some time while responding to the urgent threat of climate change.

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About Smart Growth America: Smart Growth America envisions a country where no matter where you live, or who you are, you can enjoy living in a place that is healthy, prosperous, and resilient. We empower communities through technical assistance, advocacy, and thought leadership to realize our vision of livable places, healthy people, and shared prosperity. [https://smartgrowthamerica.org](https://smartgrowthamerica.org)

Transportation for America, the LOCUS Coalition of Responsible Real Estate Developers & Investors, and the National Complete Streets Coalition are programs of Smart Growth America.