What GAO Found

GAO has called for a fundamental reexamination of the nation’s surface transportation program because, among other things, the current goals are unclear, the funding outlook for the program is uncertain, and the efficiency of the system is declining. A sound basis for reexamination can productively begin with identification of and debate on underlying principles. Through prior analyses of existing programs, GAO identified a number of principles that could help drive an assessment of proposals for restructuring the federal surface transportation program. These principles include (1) defining the federal role based on identified areas of national interest, (2) incorporating performance and accountability for results into funding decisions, and (3) ensuring fiscal sustainability and employing the best tools and approaches to improve results and return on investment. GAO developed these principles based on prior analyses of existing surface transportation programs as well as a body of work that GAO developed for Congress, including its High-Risk, Performance and Accountability, and 21st Century Challenges reports. The principles do not prescribe a specific approach to restructuring, but they do highlight key attributes that will help ensure that a restructured surface transportation program addresses current challenges.

Principles For Evaluating Restructuring Proposals

- Define the federal role based on areas of national interest
- Incorporate performance and accountability for results into funding decisions
- Ensure fiscal sustainability and employ the best tools and approaches to improve results and return on investment

Source: GAO.

In its report, the Commission makes a number of recommendations for restructuring the federal surface transportation program. The recommendations include significantly increasing the level of investment by all levels of government in surface transportation, consolidating and reorganizing the current programs, speeding project delivery, and making the current program more performance- and outcome-based and mode-neutral, among other things. GAO is currently analyzing the Commission’s recommendations using the principles that GAO developed for evaluating proposals for restructuring the surface transportation program. Although this analysis is not complete, GAO’s preliminary results indicate that some of the Commission’s recommendations appear to be aligned with the principles, while others may not be aligned. For example, although the Commission identifies areas of national interest and recommends reorganizing the individual surface transportation programs around these areas, it generally recommends that the federal government pay for 80 percent of project costs without considering whether this level of funding reflects the national interest or should vary by program or project.