

Highlights of [GAO-11-77](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Through the statewide transportation planning process, states decide how to spend federal transportation funds—almost \$46 billion in fiscal year 2009. Draft legislation to reauthorize federal surface transportation legislation would, among other things, revise planning requirements to recognize states' use of rural planning organizations (RPO) and require performance measurement. As requested, GAO examined (1) states' planning activities and RPOs' satisfaction that rural needs are considered, (2) states' planning challenges, (3) the U.S. Department of Transportation's (USDOT) approach to overseeing statewide planning, and (4) states' use of performance measurement and opportunities to make statewide planning more performance based. GAO analyzed planning documents; surveyed departments of transportation in 50 states, Puerto Rico, and Washington, D.C., and 569 RPOs; interviewed officials in 6 states; and held an expert panel on performance-based planning.

What GAO Recommends

To make statewide planning more performance based, Congress should consider requiring states to update their long-range plans on a prescribed schedule, identifying outcomes for statewide planning and directing USDOT to assess states' progress in achieving them, and requiring USDOT and states to collaboratively develop performance measures. USDOT provided technical comments which we incorporated into the report as appropriate.

View [GAO-11-77](#) or key components. To view the e-supplement online, click [GAO-11-78SP](#). For more information, contact Phillip R. Herr at (202) 512-2834 or herrp@gao.gov.

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STATEWIDE TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

Opportunities Exist to Transition to Performance-Based Planning and Federal Oversight

What GAO Found

States conduct a variety of long- and short-range planning activities, and the majority of RPOs surveyed reported being generally satisfied that rural needs are considered. To develop required long-range statewide transportation plans (long-range plans), states conduct research activities, such as inventorying assets and modeling traffic. While the resulting plans generally include some performance elements, such as goals, many plans do not include performance targets. Such targets are not required, but prior GAO work shows that targets are useful tools to indicate progress toward achieving goals. To develop required short-range plans—state transportation improvement programs (STIP)—states assess needs and determine funding allocations. However, in selecting projects, states assigned greater importance to factors such as political and public support than to economic analysis of project benefits and costs. While the majority of surveyed RPOs reported being satisfied that their rural needs were considered, some RPOs reported less satisfaction with their role in allocating funds for rural areas.

States commonly cited insufficient or uncertain funding to implement transportation projects among the primary challenges to long- and short-range planning. States also reported that involving the public and addressing transportation data limitations were significant long-range planning challenges. Short-range planning challenges included meeting federal requirements to demonstrate the availability of sufficient project funding and to update the STIP to reflect changes.

USDOT has a limited role in the oversight of long-range plans, and pursuant to federal law, its STIP oversight focuses on states' compliance with procedures. Furthermore, USDOT is not required to review long-range plans, states are not required to update them on a schedule, and some states reported infrequent updates. For example, 10 states reported not updating plans since the most recent surface transportation authorization in 2005. Limited USDOT oversight and infrequent updates present risks, including the ineffective use of federal planning funds. For the STIP, USDOT's oversight focuses, as required, on states' compliance with federal planning procedures. Information on whether states achieve outcomes such as reducing congestion is limited.

While states are not required to set performance outcomes in planning, most states reported using performance measurement in the areas of safety and asset condition. Several challenges limit broader use of performance measures, including identifying indicators for qualitative measures such as livability and collecting data across transportation modes. Through our expert panel and interviews, we identified several elements that could improve states' use of performance measures, including national goals, federal and state collaboration on developing performance measures, appropriate targets, and revised federal oversight focusing on monitoring states' progress in meeting outcomes.