

Department of Transportation Should Develop Guidance to Help Communities Prioritize Investments

GAO-26-107532

March 2026

A report to congressional requesters

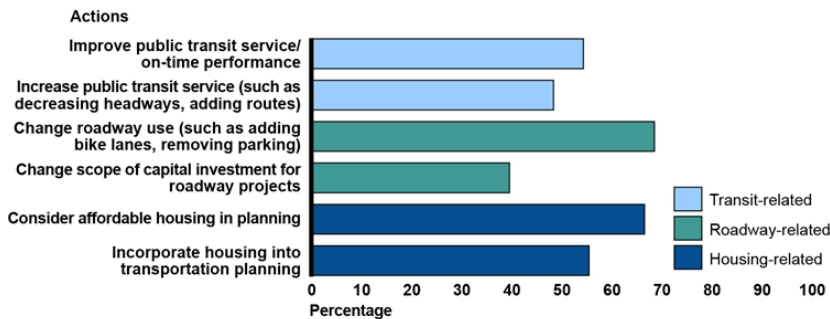
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What GAO Found

Telework rates spiked during the pandemic and remain, on average, about twice 2019 levels across large, medium, and small communities (i.e., more than 50,000 people). GAO found that increases in telework—which were, on average, highest in large communities with populations of 1 million or more—contributed to changes in transit, vehicle use, and real estate, primarily in large communities. Changes included decreased transit ridership and fare revenue; new vehicle travel patterns, such as when and where people traveled; and a shift in demand for commercial real estate and housing away from some central business districts, according to 352 Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO) that responded to GAO’s survey and studies GAO reviewed.

Most MPOs reported that they or others in their communities, such as transit providers, took actions related to transit, vehicle use, and housing to respond to these changes. For example, over half of MPOs reported that transit providers in their communities improved or increased service to attract riders. However, across the 26 largest transit cities, one had ridership levels in 2024 that surpassed 2019 levels.

Percent of MPOs Reporting Selected Actions Taken in Their Communities Since 2019



Source: GAO survey of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO) nationwide. | GAO-26-107532

Many MPOs reported taking steps to understand new transportation trends that can help them accurately forecast travel demand to support transportation plans. For example, a majority of MPOs reported surveying transit riders to understand transit needs in their communities. Yet, about one-third of MPOs reported they do not intend, or know how, to incorporate information on telework into their planning. More than 90 percent of MPOs expressed a desire for more guidance on this from the Department of Transportation (DOT). Federal law directed DOT to conduct a travel demand study by November 2023 and develop guidance to help MPOs forecast travel demand and prioritize transportation investments. DOT cited resource constraints and noted the complex and continuous nature of this effort. It has started addressing the requirements, such as contracting with private firms to help develop best practices. However, DOT did not have a plan or timeline for completion. Doing so could help provide a basis for DOT to monitor its progress and adjust efforts as needed. Fully addressing the required study and guidance would also help MPOs navigate changes related to telework and improve forecasts for prioritizing communities’ transportation investments.

Why GAO Did This Study

MPOs are responsible for short- and long-term transportation planning in urbanized areas with populations of over 50,000—a process that DOT oversees.

GAO was asked to review the effects of telework on public transit, vehicle use, and real estate. GAO focused its review on communities within the boundaries of all 410 MPOs from 2019 through March 2025. This report addresses, among other things, how changes in telework affected public transit, vehicle use, and real estate; actions communities have taken in response; and the extent to which communities and DOT incorporated changing travel trends into forecasting and planning.

GAO analyzed telework and transportation data from 2019 through 2024 (the latest available data); surveyed 410 MPOs (with an 86 percent response rate); reviewed relevant federal laws and agency documents; conducted a literature review; and conducted interviews, including some in-person interviews, of agency officials and nine MPOs—selected based on size, location, and transit offerings.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOT establish and implement a detailed plan—that contains clear steps and timelines—to complete the required travel demand data and modeling study, and guidance based on information in the study. DOT concurred with GAO’s recommendation.