



May 2023

# TRAVEL AND TOURISM

## DOT Should Improve Strategic Planning and Data Collection

Accessible Version

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105967](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, in 2019—prior to the COVID-19 pandemic—the U.S. travel and tourism industry generated \$2 trillion in economic output, supporting 9.9 million American jobs. While many agencies share responsibilities for supporting travel and tourism, in recent years, Congress has increased DOT's responsibilities in this area.

The 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act includes a provision for GAO to review DOT's support for travel and tourism. This report examines (1) the extent to which DOT's grant programs support travel and tourism; and (2) the challenges DOT faces in supporting travel and tourism, and how DOT might address these challenges.

GAO reviewed pertinent statutes as well as DOT strategic planning and grant documentation. In addition, GAO interviewed DOT officials, representatives of 14 industry groups, and officials from state DOTs and tourism boards in eight selected states. GAO selected these states to obtain diversity in geographic region and in the share of travel and tourism in states' economies.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making two recommendations to DOT: (1) develop goals related to travel and tourism and incorporate them into its *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan*, and (2) develop a plan to identify and obtain additional data on travel and tourism needed to revise and implement the *Plan*. DOT concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105967](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth Repko at (202) 512-2834 or [repkoe@gao.gov](mailto:repkoe@gao.gov).

May 2023

## TRAVEL AND TOURISM

### DOT Should Improve Strategic Planning and Data Collection

#### What GAO Found

The Department of Transportation (DOT) provides grant funding to state, local, and tribal governments, among other entities, to support travel and tourism. According to DOT officials, six grant programs have specific travel and tourism related provisions. For example, the National Scenic Byways Program can fund eligible projects on roads with outstanding scenic, historic, or other qualities, including improvements to accommodate increased tourism. In fiscal year 2022, DOT made about \$5.6 billion available for these six programs. Of this amount, DOT provided \$810 million to projects selected in part for their travel and tourism benefits. DOT and stakeholders also identified 19 other DOT grant programs that did not have specific travel and tourism provisions, but funded projects with travel and tourism benefits. DOT made nearly \$68 billion available for these 19 programs in fiscal year 2022. These programs may support travel and tourism by, for example, expanding transportation capacity or enhancing connectivity between different types of transportation, such as airplanes and public transit.

#### Highway 12 in Utah, an Example of a National Scenic Byway



Source: Venemama/stock.adobe.com. | [GAO-23-105967](#)

GAO identified two key challenges that limit DOT's ability to support travel and tourism: a lack of specific goals and comprehensive data. DOT's *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan* for fiscal years 2020–2024 aims to articulate a strategic vision for making the U.S. travel and tourism industry more competitive globally. The plan identifies some general strategies and best practices for supporting travel and tourism, but does not contain strategic goals specifically related to this area. Without specific goals, it is not clear what DOT intends to achieve through its efforts. Moreover, while DOT has acknowledged the importance of using data to inform its efforts, DOT has not collected comprehensive data specifically on travel and tourism, such as on the purpose of trips, travel party size, and transportation modes used. Without such data, DOT may not be able to make informed decisions when implementing activities in support of any travel and tourism goals it identifies.

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**Abbreviations**

DOT	Department of Transportation
FAA	Federal Aviation Administration
FAST	Fixing America’s Surface Transportation Act
FHWA	Federal Highway Administration
FRA	Federal Railroad Administration
FTA	Federal Transit Administration
GPRA	Government Performance and Results Act of 1993
GPRAMA	GPRA Modernization Act of 2010
IIJA	Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act
INFRA	Nationally Significant Multimodal Freight and Highway Projects
Mega	National Infrastructure Project Assistance Program
OST	Office of the Secretary of Transportation
RAISE	Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity Program

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May 24, 2023

The Honorable Maria Cantwell  
Chair  
The Honorable Ted Cruz  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation  
United States Senate

The Honorable Sam Graves  
Chairman  
The Honorable Rick Larsen  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure  
House of Representatives

According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, in 2019—prior to the COVID-19 pandemic—the U.S. travel and tourism industry generated \$2 trillion in economic output, supporting 9.9 million American jobs and accounting for 3 percent of the gross domestic product.<sup>1</sup> The travel and tourism industry depends on the national transportation sector to facilitate the movement of people for both leisure and business travel on a day-to-day basis. A safe and efficient national transportation network is critical to this economic sector, especially as it recovers from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Investment in transportation infrastructure facilitates travel and tourism by improving infrastructure condition, increasing capacity, enhancing safety, and creating connections between different types of transportation.<sup>2</sup> Further, previous research has shown that investment in transportation infrastructure can have positive effects on travel and tourism, including increasing the number of travelers to a given

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<sup>1</sup>These estimates are based on the Department of Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis' Travel and Tourism Satellite Account. The \$2 trillion economic output includes both direct and indirect tourism output. Direct tourism output includes goods and services sold directly to visitors, and indirect tourism output includes sales of all goods and services used to produce that direct output. Similarly, the 9.9 million jobs include those related both directly and indirectly to tourism.

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Department of Transportation, *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan for FY 2020-2024* (Washington, D.C.: January 2021).

destination, enhancing the desirability of an area for tourists, and improving regional competitiveness.<sup>3</sup>

The U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) oversees and administers programs, policies, and regulations that support the safety, efficiency, and capacity of the national transportation network to facilitate all types of travel. DOT provides significant funding through both discretionary and formula funding for transportation infrastructure. Direct support or funding for travel and tourism has not historically been a major part of DOT's responsibilities. However, in recent years Congress has increased DOT's specific responsibilities related to travel and tourism through the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act, enacted in 2015,<sup>4</sup> and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), enacted in 2021.<sup>5</sup> The IIJA expanded the award criteria for several DOT discretionary grant programs to include considerations related to travel and tourism.

The IIJA includes a provision for us to review DOT's support for travel and tourism. This report examines (1) the extent to which DOT's grant programs support travel and tourism, and (2) the challenges DOT faces in supporting travel and tourism, and how DOT might address those challenges.

For both objectives, we interviewed officials from state departments of transportation (state DOTs) and tourism boards in a non-generalizable selection of eight states. We selected these states to obtain diversity in geographic region and in travel and tourism as a share of states' economies.<sup>6</sup> We also spoke with representatives of 14 travel and tourism industry groups, selected to obtain diversity in transportation mode, stakeholders represented (such as industry, consumers, organized labor, Tribes, and historically disadvantaged populations) and other characteristics.

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<sup>3</sup>Bruce Prideaux, "The Role of the Transport System in Destination Development," *Tourism Management*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2000): 53-63, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177\(99\)00079-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177(99)00079-5); and Jameel Khadaroo and Boopen Seetanah, "Transport Infrastructure and Tourism Development," *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 34, no. 4 (2007): 1021-1032, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2007.05.010>.

<sup>4</sup>Pub. L. No. 114-94, 132 Stat. 1312 (2015).

<sup>5</sup>Pub. L. No. 117-58, 135 Stat. 429 (2021).

<sup>6</sup>The eight states we selected were California, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Vermont.

To determine the extent to which DOT grant programs support travel and tourism, we reviewed DOT documents, such as notices of funding opportunity, and interviewed DOT officials and stakeholders to identify DOT grant programs that supported travel and tourism in fiscal years 2017 through 2022. Additionally, we reviewed statutes describing criteria related to travel and tourism for the grant programs we identified. To identify which projects in these programs DOT selected to receive a grant for reasons partly related to travel and tourism, we analyzed available information on DOT's decisions (e.g., selection memos and project fact sheets). We then analyzed DOT grant data to determine the total amount awarded through these programs, as well as the total amount awarded to projects selected partly for reasons related to travel and tourism.

To identify challenges DOT faces in supporting travel and tourism, and how DOT might address those challenges, we reviewed DOT strategic planning documents, including DOT's Strategic Plans for fiscal years 2018-2022 and 2022-2026, as well as DOT's *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan*, and interviewed DOT officials and stakeholders.<sup>7</sup> We compared DOT's *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan* to leading practices for agency strategic plans.<sup>8</sup> We also compared DOT's efforts to address identified barriers to, among other criteria, DOT's agency Strategic Plan for fiscal years 2022-2026 and *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*—specifically the principle that management should use quality information

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<sup>7</sup>U.S. Department of Transportation, *Strategic Plan for FY 2018-2022* (Washington D.C.: February 2018), *Strategic Plan FY 2022-2026* (Washington D.C.: 2022).

<sup>8</sup>Since 1993, Congress has required federal agencies through the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) of 1993 to develop strategic plans with long-term, outcome-oriented goals and objectives, annual goals linked to achieving the long-term goals, and annual reports on the results achieved. The GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA) updated GPRA to, among other things, create a government-wide planning and reporting framework, including federal government priority goals, performance plans, quarterly priority progress reviews, and a governmentwide performance website. See Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 285, as updated by Pub. L. No. 111-352, 124 Stat. 3866. Although GPRA and GPRAMA requirements apply at the departmental level (e.g., DOT), we have previously stated that they can serve as leading practices at other organizational levels, such as component agencies, offices, programs, and projects. See, for example, GAO, *5G Deployment: FCC Needs Comprehensive Strategic Planning to Guide Its Efforts*, [GAO-20-468](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 12, 2020) and *Environmental Justice: EPA Needs to Take Additional Actions to Help Ensure Effective Implementation*, [GAO-12-77](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 6, 2011). See also, GAO, *Managing for Results: Critical Issues for Improving Federal Agencies' Strategic Plans*, [GAO/IGD-97-180](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 16, 1997).

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to achieve the entity's objectives.<sup>9</sup> For additional information on our scope and methodology, see appendix I.

We conducted this performance audit from March 2022 to May 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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## Background

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### Travel and Tourism Definition and Statistics

DOT defines long-distance travel and tourism trips as any overnight leisure or business trip greater than 50 miles using any mode, or combination of modes, of transportation. However, there is no clear consensus on a definition in the travel and tourism industry or across the federal government. For example, the Bureau of Economic Analysis, within the Department of Commerce, defines tourism as the economic output of goods and services sold to visitors who travel 50 miles or more or who stay overnight in a paid accommodation. In this report, we refer to any overnight trip greater than 50 miles for any purpose, as well as any travel explicitly for the purpose of tourism, as "travel and tourism."

DOT has not collected data specifically on long-distance travel since the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, within DOT, conducted its 1995

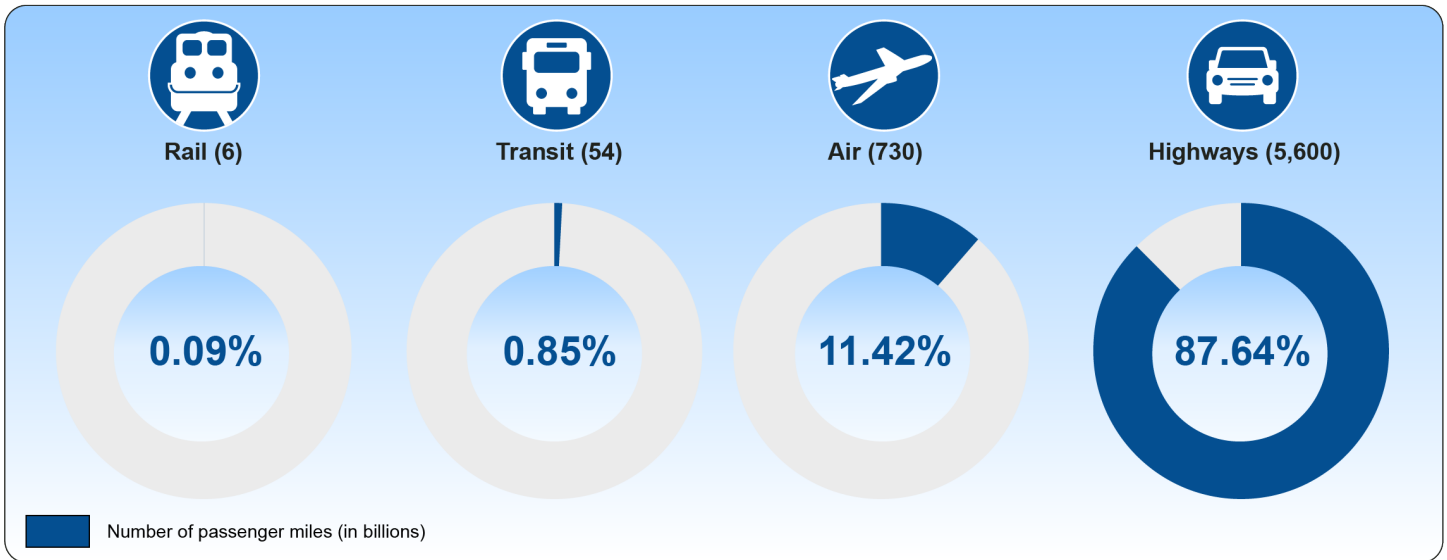
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<sup>9</sup>U.S. Department of Transportation, *National Travel and Tourism Strategic Plan for FY 2020-2024*, (Washington, D.C.: January 2021) and GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).



American Travel Survey.<sup>10</sup> However, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics reported that most passenger travel in the United States—including both local commutes and long-distance travel—occurs on highways, which accounted for nearly 5.6 trillion passenger miles in 2019.<sup>11</sup> The same year, commercial airlines accounted for 730 billion passenger miles, all forms of public transit for 54 billion passenger miles, and Amtrak for 6 billion passenger miles in that pre-pandemic year. (See fig. 1.)

Figure 1: Passenger Miles Traveled on Different Transportation Modes in 2019



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Transportation information. | GAO-23-105967

<sup>10</sup>The survey was intended to collect information about the long-distance travel of people living in the United States by collecting quarterly information related to the characteristics of the people, households, and trips of 100 miles or greater for around 80,000 American households. U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, "American Travel Survey" (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 25, 2021), accessed December 23, 2022, <https://www.bts.gov/browse-statistical-products-and-data/surveys/american-travel-survey>.

<sup>11</sup>U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, *Transportation Statistics Annual Report 2021* (Washington, D.C.: 2020). One passenger-mile is equal to one passenger carried one mile. For example, 10 passengers carried 10 miles would equal 100 passenger miles.

**Accessible Data for Figure 1: Passenger Miles Traveled on Different Transportation Modes in 2019**

<b>Rail (6)</b>	<b>Transit (54)</b>	<b>Air (730)</b>	<b>Highways (5,600)</b>
0.09%	0.85%	11.42%	87.64%

Note: Passenger miles include both local commutes and long-distance travel.

## DOT's Role in Supporting Travel and Tourism

DOT oversees and administers programs, policies, and regulations to keep the traveling public safe while improving the efficiency and capacity of the transportation system and contributing to the nation's economic growth. According to DOT's strategic plan, safety is the Department's primary mission and top priority. In addition to safety, DOT has established agency-wide strategic goals including economic strength and global competitiveness, equity, climate and sustainability, transformation, and organizational excellence.

DOT's Office of the Secretary of Transportation (OST) and nine modal administrations—which include the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), and Federal Transit Administration (FTA)—each have their sets of responsibilities, primarily focused on safety and efficiency. Congress has authorized a variety of authorities for the Secretary of Transportation and the modal administrations to carry out these responsibilities.

As part of its responsibilities, DOT conducts a wide range of activities to support the transportation system in ways that benefit all travelers, regardless of the purpose of their travel. For example, FAA provides air traffic services for the continental United States and more than 24 million square miles of airspace over parts of the Atlantic, Pacific, and Arctic oceans. These services are critical to helping air passengers arrive safely and on time to more than 3,000 airports across the country that comprise the national system of airports. FRA employs approximately 350 inspectors focused on compliance and enforcement in areas such as railroad tracks, signal and train control, and operating practices, to help keep rail passengers safe. Similarly, FTA administers a safety program and compliance oversight process for transit systems across the country.

Additionally, DOT provides financial assistance to state, local, and tribal governments, among other entities, through formula and discretionary grant programs. Recipients of DOT funding may use it to support a variety of eligible projects, many of which may have benefits for travel and tourism. DOT obligated approximately \$120 billion in grant funding in fiscal year 2022. These programs are administered by DOT and its modal administrations.

- **Formula grant programs.** DOT apportions formula grant funding via noncompetitive programs, which allocate funds based on distribution formulas prescribed by statute. In general, rather than directly administering the activities it funds through formula grants, DOT distributes these funds to states, federally recognized tribal recipients, local governments, and transit agencies. These funds may be further allocated to localities at state, tribal, or agency discretion. According to DOT, most federal transportation funding flows through formula grants. Grantees generally have a measure of flexibility in selecting projects to fund via federal formula grant programs. For example, recipients of FHWA formula grants could potentially use such funds to support projects that would expand highway capacity or make operational improvements, which can reduce congestion and facilitate tourists' access to recreational destinations.
- **Discretionary grant programs.** DOT awards discretionary grants on a competitive basis that target national transportation priorities, such as improving the condition of critical infrastructure, enhancing economic competitiveness, and reducing transportation fatalities. For example, FHWA may award funding to grantees through the Bridge Investment Grant discretionary grant program to replace, repair, or maintain bridges that could help to preserve vehicle access to tourism destinations such as islands. Under Office of Management and Budget regulations, federal agencies are to disclose in their published notice of funding opportunity documents the criteria they will use to evaluate discretionary grant applications. These criteria include "the merit and other review criteria that evaluators will use to judge applications including any statutory, regulatory, or other preferences (e.g., minority status or Native American tribal preferences) that will be applied in the review process."<sup>12</sup>

The FAST Act, enacted in 2015, expanded DOT's specific responsibilities related to travel and tourism. The Act directed DOT to develop a national

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<sup>12</sup>Office of Management and Budget, *Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards*, 2 C.F.R. Pt. 200, App. I(E)(1).

travel and tourism infrastructure strategic plan that among other things, identifies (1) strategies for improving intermodal connectivity for long-haul passenger travel and tourism, and (2) best practices for improving the performance of the national transportation network.

The IIJA further expanded DOT's specific travel and tourism responsibilities in 2021. The IIJA represents a record investment in the nation's infrastructure. Among its many objectives, one was for DOT to implement a strategy to use IIJA's infrastructure investments to support the travel and tourism industry during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the IIJA amended the FAST Act and directed DOT to update the *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan* to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic within 180 days of IIJA's enactment on November 15, 2021. Further, the IIJA directed DOT to establish a Chief Travel and Tourism Officer to collaborate with the Assistant Secretary for Aviation and International Affairs in carrying out the *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan* and other activities related to travel and tourism. The IIJA also mandated that DOT issue a report by November 15, 2022, on its support for travel and tourism, including how its grant programs support travel and tourism and measures DOT or Congress should take to improve its support. As of April 2023, DOT has not issued this report.

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## Other Federal Support for Travel and Tourism

Additional support for travel and tourism is shared across the federal government, particularly in the Department of Commerce. For example, the Department of Commerce's National Travel and Tourism Office's mission is to encourage growth in travel and tourism by reducing institutional barriers to tourism and administering marketing efforts. The Office also provides official travel and tourism statistics on subjects including international travel to and from the United States, information on international travel and tourism markets, and how travel and tourism affect the economy.

In addition, the Department of Commerce's Travel and Tourism Advisory Board advises the Secretary of Commerce on matters relating to the travel and tourism industry in the United States. The Travel and Tourism Advisory Board is comprised of up to thirty-two members appointed by the Secretary of Commerce. Members represent companies and organizations in the travel and tourism industry across a broad range of products and services, company sizes, and geographic locations.

The Secretary of Commerce and officials of several other federal agencies—including DOT—coordinate on government-wide travel and tourism activities and policies through the Tourism Policy Council, chaired by the Secretary of Commerce.<sup>13</sup> The Tourism Policy Council is responsible for coordinating national policies and programs relating to international travel and tourism. For example, in June 2022, the Tourism Policy Council issued the *National Travel and Tourism Strategy*, on which DOT provided input. The Strategy aims to increase international visitation and spending in the United States while also advancing other priorities across the travel and tourism industry, such as environmental sustainability and equity.<sup>14</sup> The Strategy is divided into four aspects, including (1) promoting the United States as a travel destination; (2) facilitating travel to and within the United States; (3) ensuring diverse, inclusive, and accessible tourism experiences; and (4) fostering resilient and sustainable travel and tourism.

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## Many DOT Grant Programs Support Travel and Tourism, according to DOT and Selected Stakeholders

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### DOT Identified Six Grant Programs with Specific Provisions for Supporting Travel and Tourism

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According to DOT officials, six grant programs have statutory or administrative provisions specifically relating to travel and tourism.<sup>15</sup> (See table 1.) For example, one such statutory provision requires the Secretary to evaluate the extent to which a project increases tourism opportunities.

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<sup>13</sup>Under statute, other federal agency officials involved in the Tourism Policy Council include the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of the Interior, the Secretary of Labor, the Commissioner for U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and the Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization Service. The statute also allows the Secretary of Commerce to invite representatives of other federal agencies which have affected interests, and the current Tourism Policy Council includes participation by the Secretary of Agriculture, the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, the Administrator of the Small Business Administration, and the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 22 U.S.C. § 2124.

<sup>14</sup>U.S. Department of Commerce, *2022 National Travel and Tourism Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: June 6, 2022).

<sup>15</sup>According to DOT officials, these six programs are the only DOT grant programs that explicitly consider benefits to travel and tourism as part of providing or awarding grant funding. For additional information on how these programs were identified, see appendix I.

Administrative provisions include project evaluation criteria set out in a notice of funding opportunity through which DOT is to assess the degree to which a project will enhance tourism opportunities. DOT made about \$5.6 billion available through these programs in fiscal year 2022. According to our analysis, as of March 2023, DOT had awarded about \$810 million to projects it selected, in part, for their travel and tourism benefits. However, in each of these programs, support for travel and tourism is only one among many provisions applicable to the grant award process.

**Table 1: DOT Identified Grant Programs with Provisions for Supporting Travel and Tourism, Fiscal Year 2022**

Administering entity	Program name	Program description
Federal Highway Administration	National Scenic Byways Program	Funds improvements along roads with outstanding scenic, historic, cultural, natural, recreational, or archeological qualities.
Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration	Metropolitan Planning Program	Provides funding for transportation planning in metropolitan areas.
Office of the Secretary	Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) Program	Funds transportation projects that will have a significant local or regional impact.
Office of the Secretary	National Infrastructure Project Assistance Program (Mega)	Supports large, complex projects that are difficult to fund by other means and likely to generate national or regional economic, mobility, or safety benefits.
Office of the Secretary	Nationally Significant Multimodal Freight and Highway Projects (INFRA)	Funds multimodal freight and highway projects of national or regional significance.
Office of the Secretary	Rural Surface Transportation Grant Program	Supports projects that improve and expand surface transportation infrastructure in rural areas and generate regional economic growth.

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Transportation (DOT) documentation. | GAO-23-105967

**National Scenic Byways Program.** This program funds eligible projects along roads with outstanding scenic, historic, cultural, natural, recreational, or archeological qualities.<sup>16</sup> According to the National Scenic Byways program statute, eligible projects include those related to developing and implementing a corridor management plan to maintain the qualities of a scenic byway and provide for accommodation of increased

<sup>16</sup>Specifically, eligible roads include those designated as National Scenic Byways or All-American Roads, America's Byways®, state scenic byways, or Indian Tribe scenic byways. Funding and technical assistance is also available for the planning, design, or development of a state or Indian Tribe scenic byway program. 23 U.S.C. § 162(b).

tourism and development of related amenities.<sup>17</sup> Projects that develop and distribute tourist information to the public, including interpretive information about a scenic byway, are also eligible for award.<sup>18</sup> In April 2023, FHWA awarded \$21.8 million in funding for 33 projects in 29 states.

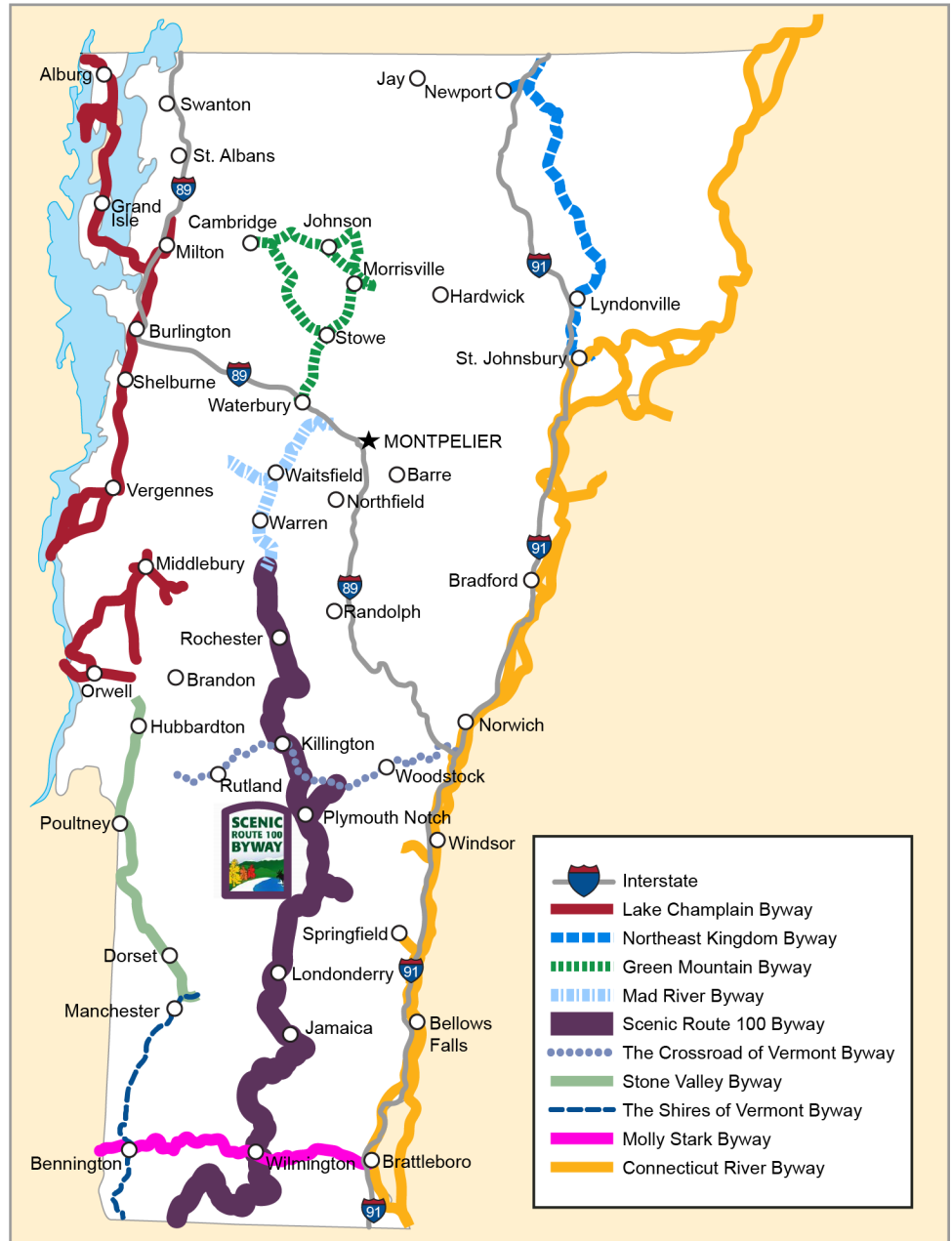
State DOT officials from seven of our eight selected states said the National Scenic Byways program supported travel and tourism, and used funding from this program for a variety of projects. For example, officials from Vermont's DOT and tourism board said this program supports travel and tourism in their state, such as on the Route 100 scenic byway, which spans more than 200 miles through central Vermont where interstates are not readily available. Officials said past funding allowed them to develop, create, and distribute marketing materials, such as a map and website for the state's designated scenic byways. The officials said these marketing materials continue to be valuable resources for tourists in the state. (See fig. 2.)

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<sup>17</sup>23 U.S.C. § 162(c).

<sup>18</sup>Other eligible projects include those: improving safety to an existing scenic byway; constructing pedestrian or bicycle facilities along a scenic byway; enhancing access to recreational areas along a scenic byway; protecting historic, cultural, natural, recreational, or archeological resources along a scenic byway; and developing a scenic byway marketing program.

**Figure 2: Federally-Designated Scenic Byways in Vermont and Example of Byway Branding**



Source: GAO analysis of Vermont Department of Tourism and Marketing information and Map Resources. | GAO-23-105967

**Metropolitan Planning Program.** This program provides funding for transportation planning in metropolitan areas. As part of the statutorily



required metropolitan planning process, recipient metropolitan planning organizations must consider projects and strategies that will, among other things, enhance travel and tourism.<sup>19</sup> Congress, through the IIJA, authorized \$438 million from the Highway Trust Fund for this program for fiscal year 2022. While FHWA officials said they work with grantees to ensure they meet this requirement, grantees can determine the extent to which travel and tourism is a priority for their project, and must document how they considered travel and tourism as part of the planning process.

**Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) Program.** Through the RAISE program, DOT awards discretionary grants to states, localities, and other entities for surface transportation projects that will have a significant local or regional impact.<sup>20</sup> Under statutory selection criteria, the Secretary of Transportation is to evaluate the extent to which a project increases tourism opportunities, among other things. DOT has established merit criteria that further define and interpret the statutory selection criteria, and a multi-step process to evaluate grant applications. DOT's merit criteria evaluate, among others, the extent to which a project increases opportunities for travel and tourism, increases affordable transportation

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<sup>19</sup>23 U.S.C. § 134(h)(1)(J). Metropolitan planning organizations, in coordination with the state and public transportation operators, must develop transportation plans and improvement programs for metropolitan areas of the state. 23 U.S.C. § 134(c)(1). Metropolitan planning organizations are defined in statute as the designated local decision-making body that is responsible for carrying out the transportation planning process in metropolitan areas. An MPO must be designated for each urbanized area with a population of 50,000 or more. 23 U.S.C. § 134(b),(d).

<sup>20</sup>Prior to 2021, the RAISE program was known as the Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery program and the Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development program. In this report, we refer to all iterations of the program as RAISE.

options, and addresses racial equity or other transportation-related disparities.<sup>21</sup>

Over the years, DOT has modified the extent to which it has considered travel and tourism benefits when awarding projects through the RAISE program. Prior to the passage of the IIJA, DOT considered the extent to which a project promoted economic competitiveness when selecting projects to receive awards.<sup>22</sup> In fiscal year 2022, the IIJA established revised primary selection criteria, including the criterion that projects increase economic competitiveness and opportunities, including increasing tourism opportunities.

Based on appropriations for the RAISE program in the IIJA and Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022, DOT's Notice of Funding Opportunity announced a total of approximately \$2.3 billion available for the fiscal year 2022 RAISE program. According to our analysis, in fiscal years 2017 through 2021, DOT awarded a total of about \$4.8 billion to 348 projects.<sup>23</sup> Of this amount, approximately \$378 million (about 8 percent) of funding went to 25 projects that were selected, in part, for their

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<sup>21</sup>Some elements of DOT's merit criteria used in the RAISE program reflect DOT's interpretation and implementation of statutory RAISE selection criteria. For example, while statutory RAISE grant language in the IIJA requires the Secretary to evaluate specified selection criteria including the extent to which a project "improves the quality of life of rural areas or urbanized areas," the IIJA does not define the phrase "improves the quality of life." 49 U.S.C. § 6702(d)(3). In turn, with respect to this "quality of life" element, DOT's Notice of Funding Opportunity for the fiscal year 2022 RAISE program sets out that DOT will consider whether and how the project will improve quality of life by, among other things, increasing affordable transportation choices or proactively addressing racial equity. For additional information on RAISE grant selection criteria and projects funded by RAISE grants, see GAO, *Discretionary Transportation Grants: DOT Should Better Communicate Federal Share Requirements to Applicants*, [GAO-23-105639](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 17, 2022).

<sup>22</sup>For fiscal years 2019 through 2021, RAISE appropriations act provisions required the Secretary to consider and award projects based solely on the selection criteria from the fiscal year 2017 Notice of Funding Opportunity. Pub. L. No. 116-6, 133 Stat. 13, 397 (2019); Pub. L. No. 116-94, 133 Stat. 2534, 2935 (2019); Pub. L. No. 116-260, 134 Stat. 1182, 1825 (2020). The fiscal year 2017 Notice of Funding Opportunity included economic competitiveness as one of the primary selection criteria. 82 Fed. Reg. 42426 (Sept. 7, 2017).

<sup>23</sup>The awarded amounts are measured in nominal dollars, and, in general, these awards have been available to be obligated and expended in different years. For example, fiscal year 2021 RAISE grant award funds were available for obligation by DOT through September 30, 2024 and were to be expended by DOT by September 30, 2029. 86 Fed. Reg. 21794, 21796 (Apr. 23, 2021).

travel and tourism benefits. In fiscal year 2022, DOT awarded about \$2.2 billion to 166 projects. Of this amount, approximately \$271 million (about 12 percent) went to 20 projects selected, in part, for their travel and tourism benefits.

RAISE funding may support travel and tourism in various ways. For example, in 2022 DOT awarded \$12 million to a project in St. Augustine, Florida, that DOT said would benefit tourism by relieving traffic congestion, enhancing mobility, and facilitating tourist access to areas such as a state park. To achieve these goals, the project will deploy transportation technologies across the city, such as flashing beacons in areas with high pedestrian traffic and smart lighting sensors at mid-block crossings.

**Multimodal Project Discretionary Grants.** DOT administers the Multimodal Project Discretionary Grant Opportunity, which allows applicants to apply for up to three discretionary grant programs using one streamlined application.<sup>24</sup> According to the Multimodal Project Discretionary Grant Opportunity's Notice of Funding Opportunity for fiscal year 2022, although projects must satisfy the differing statutory requirements relevant to the program for which they will potentially receive an award, applicants are all also evaluated using common project outcome evaluation criteria.<sup>25</sup> Under the "economic impacts, freight movement, and job creation" project outcome criterion, DOT further provides that it will assess the degree to which the project contributes to one or more of 10 specified types of outcomes. One of these outcomes is the extent to which a project will enhance recreational and tourism opportunities by providing access to federal lands, national parks, national forests, national recreation areas, national wildlife refuges,

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<sup>24</sup>DOT's notice of funding opportunity for the fiscal year 2022 Multimodal Project Discretionary Grant Opportunity provides that project applications will be evaluated on the basis of statutory requirements and selection criteria. Eligible projects are to advance through a senior review team, who is to assign project ratings for each program. The senior review team is then to compile a list of projects for the Secretary to consider for award.

<sup>25</sup>The notice of funding opportunity for the fiscal year 2022 program provides that DOT will consider the extent to which projects address six outcome criteria, including (1) safety; (2) state of good repair; (3) economic impacts, freight movement, and job creation; (4) climate change, resiliency, and the environment; (5) equity, multimodal options, and quality of life; and (6) innovation areas such as technology, project delivery, and financing.

wilderness areas, or state parks. The Multimodal Project Discretionary Grant Opportunity is composed of the following three programs:

- **National Infrastructure Project Assistance (Mega) Program.** This program, authorized in the IIJA, supports large, complex projects that are difficult to fund by other means and likely to generate national or regional economic, mobility, or safety benefits, according to DOT. Based on appropriations for the Mega program in the IIJA, DOT's Notice of Funding Opportunity provided that up to \$1 billion would be made available for this program for fiscal year 2022. DOT issued nine awards in fiscal year 2022 for a total of about \$1.2 billion, and according to our analysis, awarded approximately \$90 million (about 8 percent) to two projects selected, in part, for their travel and tourism benefits.<sup>26</sup> For example, DOT awarded \$30 million to improve a multimodal car, bus, bicycle and pedestrian corridor in Santa Cruz, California. This project will add crossings to the New Coastal Rail Trail, which, according to DOT, is key for transportation, recreation, eco-tourism, coastal access, and other purposes that serve visitors.
- **Nationally Significant Multimodal Freight and Highway Projects (INFRA) Program.** This program, which awards grants to multimodal freight and highway projects of national or regional significance, was updated in the IIJA to, among other things, expand eligibility to a greater range of projects. For example, wildlife crossing and marine highway corridor projects are now eligible for funding. Based on appropriations for the INFRA program, DOT's Notice of Funding Opportunity provided that approximately \$1.6 billion would be made available for this program for fiscal year 2022.<sup>27</sup> DOT issued 26 awards in fiscal year 2022 for a total of about \$1.5 billion, and according to our analysis, awarded approximately \$321 million (about 21 percent) to five projects selected, in part, for their travel and tourism benefits. For example, DOT awarded \$80 million to replace

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<sup>26</sup>According to DOT officials, the \$1.2 billion award amount includes fiscal year 2022 funding as well as additional funding awarded from fiscal year 2023 and contingent commitments of amounts from fiscal year 2024 and fiscal year 2025 as part of a multi-year award. The notice of funding opportunity for the fiscal year 2022 Multimodal Project Discretionary Grant Opportunity noted that 49 U.S.C. § 6701(j) authorizes DOT to enter into multiyear grant agreements for Mega projects and that those agreements may include a commitment, contingent on amounts to be specified in law in advance for such commitments, to provide future year funds.

<sup>27</sup>The notice of funding opportunity for the fiscal year 2022 Multimodal Project Discretionary Grant Opportunity also provided that, in addition to the fiscal year 2022 funds, "amounts from prior year INFRA authorizations, presently estimated at up to \$150 million, be made available and awarded under this solicitation."

bridges connecting major tourism areas in Wisconsin, which contribute to a large share of the state's tourism revenue.

- **Rural Surface Transportation Grant Program.** This program, authorized in the IIJA, supports projects that improve and expand surface transportation infrastructure in rural areas with the goals of increasing connectivity, improving the safety and reliability of the movement of people and freight, and generating regional economic growth. Under the program's statutory provisions, eligible projects include those that provide for accommodations of increased tourism and development of related amenities. Based on IIJA authorization of appropriations, DOT's notice of funding opportunity provided that up to \$300 million would be made available for this program for fiscal year 2022. DOT issued 12 awards for fiscal year 2022 for a total of about \$274 million, and according to our analysis, awarded approximately \$129 million (about 47 percent) to three projects selected, in part, for their travel and tourism benefits. For example, DOT awarded \$25 million to the Madera 41 Expressway project in Fresno, California. This project will upgrade a two-lane rural highway into a four-lane expressway, which will improve safety, reduce congestion, and improve access to Yosemite National Park.

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### DOT and Stakeholders Identified Other DOT Grant Programs that Fund Projects with Benefits for Travel and Tourism

DOT officials and selected stakeholders told us that in addition to the six programs discussed above, other DOT discretionary and formula grant programs benefit travel and tourism, even if doing so is not explicitly stated as a goal or requirement of the program. Specifically, they identified 19 other DOT grant programs that fund projects with benefits for travel and tourism.<sup>28</sup> DOT made nearly \$68 billion available for fiscal year 2022 for these programs. DOT officials and selected stakeholders said that by providing funding for other purposes, such as the following, these programs also support travel and tourism.

- **Expanding transportation capacity.** DOT grant programs that expand capacity for the safe and effective movement of goods and people can have travel and tourism benefits, such as relieving congestion and facilitating access to recreational destinations. For

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<sup>28</sup>See appendix II for a full list of programs that DOT officials and selected stakeholders identified as having benefits for travel and tourism.

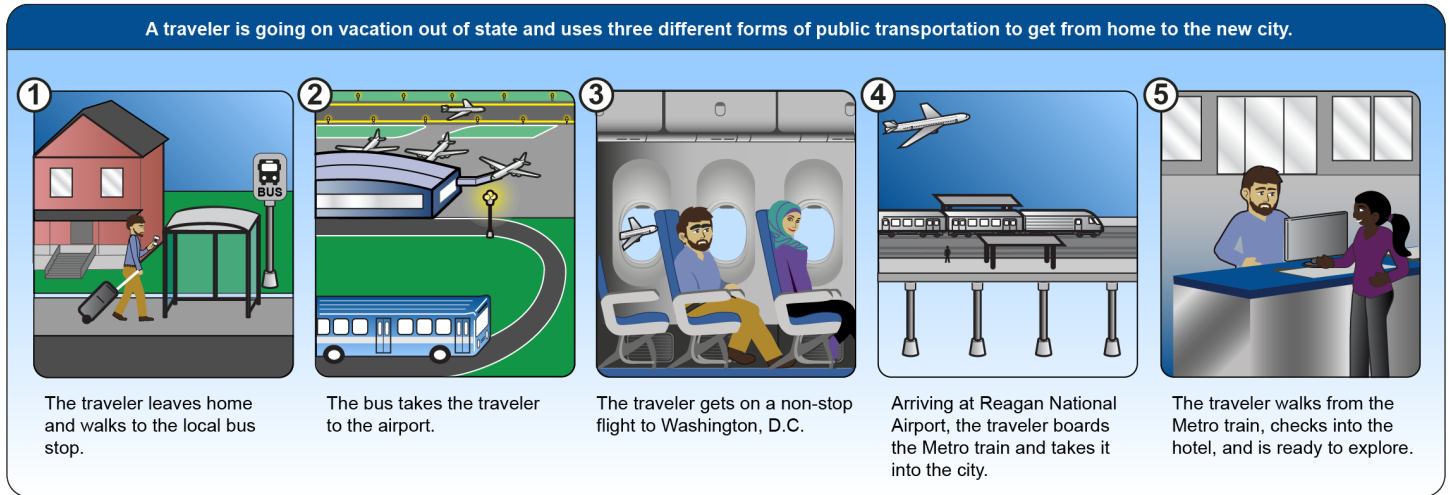
example, representatives of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, an industry group, said that the Surface Transportation Block Grant program supports travel and tourism through its funding for transportation planning, including for expanding transportation capacity around popular tourism destinations. For example, the representatives told us the North Carolina DOT has used funds from this program to expand roads and bridges to accommodate congestion to the Outer Banks, an area frequented by tourists.

- **Enhancing intermodal connectivity.** DOT funding to improve connectivity between different modes of transportation may support travel and tourism, such as by facilitating travelers' movement from airports to hotels or other visitor destinations. For example, tourists may use several different modes of travel to get from their homes to their destinations. (See fig. 3.) In particular, some of FTA's discretionary grant programs, such as the Capital Investment Grants program and the Passenger Ferry Grant program, include intermodal connectivity among their evaluation criteria, and FTA officials told us that travel and tourism are inherently intermodal activities.<sup>29</sup> For example, the sponsor of a Capital Investment Grants program project in Miami, Florida, plans to implement a bus rapid transit service to connect major centers of activity and promote intermodal connectivity, ultimately connecting downtown Miami with Miami International Airport.

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<sup>29</sup>The Capital Investment Grants program funds capital investments in transit, including commuter rail, light rail, streetcars, and bus rapid transit. The Passenger Ferry Grant program funds projects that support passenger ferry systems in urbanized areas. In fiscal year 2022, DOT distributed \$4.6 billion in funding through the Capital Investment Grants program, and \$34.4 million through the Passenger Ferry Grant program.

**Figure 3: Example of Tourist Use of Different Transportation Modes**



Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105967

**Accessible Data for Figure 3: Example of Tourist Use of Different Transportation Modes**

1. The traveler leaves home and walks to the local bus stop.
  2. The bus takes the traveler to the airport.
  3. The traveler gets on non-stop flight to Washington, D.C.
  4. Arriving at Reagan National Airport, the traveler boards the Metro train and takes it into the city.
  5. The traveler walks from the Metro train, checks into the hotel, and is ready to explore.
- **Improving pedestrian and bicycle access.** DOT grant funding for bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure—such as safe sidewalks, multiuse paths, bicycle lanes, designated roads for bicycle riders, and protected bike lanes—might provide additional means of transportation for tourists. Representatives of the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations, an industry group, told us that these enhancements would support micro-mobility options, such as bike shares and electric scooters, which tourists often use. Additionally, Pennsylvania DOT officials said they used funding from FHWA’s Transportation Alternatives program to support hiking and bicycle trails that can be used by tourists.<sup>30</sup>
  - **Accessing recreation on federal lands.** FHWA’s Federal Lands Access Program and Federal Lands Transportation Program are formula grant programs that fund improvements to transportation

<sup>30</sup>The Transportation Alternatives Program generally funds smaller-scale transportation projects such as pedestrian and bicycle facilities. In fiscal year 2022, the program provided grantees with approximately \$1.4 million in funding.

facilities that provide access to and within federal lands. These include tourist destinations such as national parks, and other high-use recreation sites or economically important locations. For example, Missouri DOT officials told us FHWA's Federal Lands Access Program supports tourism in their state.<sup>31</sup> Projects supported by this program in Missouri include roadway resurfacing on a county road with access to Ozark National Scenic Riverways and a bridge replacement on a road with access to Mark Twain National Forest.

DOT officials could not estimate the number of programs or proportion of funds from its programs that support travel and tourism, but said DOT's overall support may be substantial. According to officials, DOT's grant programs support safe and sustainable transportation infrastructure for the general public, including travelers and tourists. Officials said it is challenging to estimate the number of programs or amount of funding that support travel and tourism because many improvements to mobility can have such benefits, and because tourists and non-tourists use the same transportation corridors. Given the centrality of mobility to DOT's responsibilities and the various ways that support for transportation infrastructure may benefit travel and tourism, the total amount of DOT grant funding available to support travel and tourism may be substantial.

Estimating the extent to which other DOT grant programs support travel and tourism is also difficult because DOT does not collect data necessary for making that estimate. According to DOT officials, tourism falls within its mission to support mobility for the general public. Officials said that while DOT collects some information on mobility, it does not collect information on the travel and tourism benefits that arise from its grant programs. According to these officials, support for travel and tourism is not the primary purpose of the great majority of DOT's grant programs, and recipients of formula grants often have flexibility in how they choose to use DOT funds. Additionally, officials said collecting this information would be technically challenging or resource intensive in some cases. For example, FHWA officials said there are no fields or codes related to travel and tourism in the information systems they use to manage grant funding, and that it would be difficult to add them. Further, DOT officials said

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<sup>31</sup>The Federal Lands Access Program provides funding to improve transportation facilities that provide access to, are adjacent to, or are located within federal lands. Congress authorized \$286 million in funding for this program for fiscal year 2022.



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collecting such data could be duplicative of the Department of Commerce's data collection.<sup>32</sup>

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## DOT Faces Challenges in its Planning and Data Collection to Support Travel and Tourism, but Has Opportunities to Address Them

Our review identified two key challenges that limit DOT's ability to plan and implement activities supporting travel and tourism. First, DOT does not have strategic goals specifically related to support for travel and tourism. DOT has identified some general strategies and best practices for supporting travel and tourism, but without specific goals, it is not clear what DOT intends to achieve through its efforts. Second, despite recognizing the need for such information, DOT collects limited data related specifically to travel and tourism, which hinders its ability to make informed decisions when implementing activities in support of any travel and tourism goals it identifies.

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### DOT's Travel and Tourism Strategic Plan Does Not Include Specific Goals

*DOT's National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan* for fiscal years 2020-2024 states that its purpose is, in part, to articulate a strategic vision for DOT to make the U.S. travel and tourism industry more competitive globally. In our prior work, we identified leading practices related to key elements of agencies' strategic plans. These leading practices state that strategic plans should include: (1) agency-wide long-term goals for all major functions and operations with related short-term goals, such as annual performance goals; and (2) strategies and the various resources needed to achieve the goals and objectives.<sup>33</sup>

While the *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan* refers to DOT's four agency-wide strategic goals at the time the plan was written—

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<sup>32</sup>The Department of Commerce collects data on travel and tourism in the United States, such as international visitors to the United States and exports related to travel and tourism.

<sup>33</sup>[GAO/GGD-97-180](#).

safety, infrastructure, innovation, and accountability—it does not establish any short- or long-term goals for supporting travel and tourism.<sup>34</sup> For example, the plan does not specify what effects DOT aims to have on tourism in the United States or identify other agency-wide goals for DOT's support for travel and tourism. Rather, the plan contains an assessment of the current state and trends of travel and tourism; and identification of the major transportation facilities, barriers, and best practices that affect national travel and tourism as pursuant to requirements of the FAST Act, as amended.

DOT's *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan* also identifies some general strategies and best practices to improve infrastructure's support for travel and tourism, pursuant to requirements of the FAST Act, as amended. However, because there are no goals in this plan, it is unclear how actions in support of these strategies and practices are to be aligned within DOT. For example:

- **Strategies.** The plan describes four strategies to improve intermodal connectivity for long-haul passenger travel and tourism: (1) developing guidance and best practices to help states and metropolitan planning organizations consider enhancements to travel and tourism; (2) modernizing data collection and modeling/forecasting approaches for long-distance trips; (3) assessing how DOT formula and discretionary funding programs could benefit travel and tourism projects; and (4) communicating key travel and tourism facilities and corridors. However, the plan does not articulate how implementation of these strategies would contribute to short- or long-term goals for support of travel and tourism.
- **Best practices.** The plan identifies four best practices, derived from case studies, for improving the performance of the national transportation network in support of travel and tourism: (1) creating intermodal connections to travel hubs; (2) expanding the capacity of existing travel infrastructure; (3) pursuing innovative solutions to improve capacity and safety; and (4) using new or improved transportation options to expand access to tourist destinations. However, the plan does not pair these best practices with short- or

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<sup>34</sup>Safety, infrastructure, innovation, and accountability were DOT's previous strategic goals under its *Strategic Plan* for fiscal years 2018-2022. DOT's current department-wide strategic goals, articulated in its *Strategic Plan* for fiscal years 2022-2026, are safety, economic strength and global competitiveness, equity, climate and sustainability, transformation, and organizational excellence.

long-term goals that would allow DOT to align its efforts in support of travel and tourism.

Moreover, while the plan identifies some resources DOT could use to support travel and tourism, it does not specify how these resources will support travel and tourism in the short- or long-term. For example, the plan notes that funding from FAA's Airport Improvement Program has facilitated travel to remote tourist destinations and economically benefitted smaller urban and rural parts of the country. The plan also cites leveraging funding from state, local, and private sector sources as one of DOT's current strategies to improve infrastructure and to maintain or repair the condition of all modes of travel. However, the plan does not identify what DOT seeks to accomplish through the resources, strategies, and best practices the plan identifies. While these strategies and best practices provide useful context, they do not provide measureable outcomes unless paired with short-term or long-term goals, which would allow DOT to measure and assess its progress.

DOT officials told us they have not established goals for travel and tourism or identified and linked strategies and resources needed to achieve them because DOT supports travel and tourism in the course of fulfilling its other responsibilities to support mobility. Specifically, DOT officials said that DOT considers travel and tourism in pursuit of other goals in its agency-wide strategic plan, such as supporting economic strength and global competitiveness. For example, FRA officials said that while direct support for travel and tourism is not part of FRA's responsibilities, FRA's support for economic development, equity, and accessibility has travel and tourism benefits.

Additionally, DOT officials said they have not prioritized establishing goals specifically for travel and tourism because existing statutes do not require DOT to prioritize support for travel and tourism over its other responsibilities or those of its modal administrations. For example, FTA officials said they focus on providing accessible transit and mobility alternatives for all people and purposes—including travel and tourism—but that FTA has received no statutory or departmental direction to focus on travel and tourism. Similarly, FHWA officials said that with respect to grant programs, Congress has not acted to make support for travel and tourism a discrete goal or priority. However, over the past 7 years, Congress has expanded DOT's specific responsibilities related to travel and tourism, including requiring DOT to develop and update its *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan*.

DOT officials stated that they have taken action to fulfill statutory requirements related to travel and tourism and respond to congressional direction. In January 2023, DOT entered into an interagency agreement with the John A. Volpe National Transportation Systems Center to aid in developing DOT's report on its support for travel and tourism and the revision of DOT's *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan*.<sup>35</sup> Further, officials said that in February 2023, DOT appointed a Chief Travel and Tourism Officer, as required by the IIJA. Officials said DOT also established a department-wide internal steering committee on travel and tourism issues, led by the Travel and Tourism Officer and composed of individuals from the relevant modal administrations. In addition, DOT officials told us DOT has supported the Department of Commerce's travel and tourism efforts by participating in the Tourism Policy Council, and that DOT engages in interagency coordination on these issues. For example, DOT officials said through their participation in the Tourism Policy Council, DOT had participated in the development of the Department of Commerce's 2022 *National Travel and Tourism Strategy*.

However, without short- or long-term goals for support of travel and tourism, it is unclear what DOT intends to accomplish through its efforts. DOT's ongoing update and revision of its *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan*—which it expects to complete by the end of 2023—offers DOT a potential opportunity to establish goals in this area and identify how its existing and planned activities will help it achieve them. Given the statutory requirement to update the plan, DOT could consult—as appropriate—with relevant congressional committees on the development of these goals as part of its regular required consultations on strategic plans and agency priority goals.<sup>36</sup> We have long noted the importance of the executive branch considering Congress a partner in shaping goals at the outset, and that such consultations could provide agencies with opportunities to share information on these goals and

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<sup>35</sup>DOT established the John A. Volpe National Transportation Systems Center in 1970 to serve as a federal resource positioned to provide multidisciplinary and multimodal transportation expertise on behalf of DOT's modal administrations, the Office of the Secretary of Transportation, and other federal agencies, state and local governments, academia, and industry.

<sup>36</sup>The GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 requires agencies to consult with their relevant appropriations, authorization, and oversight committees when developing or making adjustments to their strategic plans and agency priority goals. Pub. L. No. 111-352, § 2, 124 Stat. 3866, 3867 (2011) (codified as amended at 5 U.S.C. § 306(d)).

integrate this information into their development.<sup>37</sup> As it revises its plan, DOT could also consider how its goals for travel and tourism align with and complement those established by the Department of Commerce's government-wide *National Travel and Tourism Strategy*. By developing goals for its support of travel and tourism, DOT would be better positioned to articulate its approach to supporting travel and tourism in the context of its other responsibilities, and align existing strategies and resources to support its approach.

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## DOT Does Not Collect Comprehensive Data on Travel and Tourism

DOT's *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan* emphasizes the importance of comprehensive, recent data to inform decision-making about travel and tourism support. Moreover, DOT's *Strategic Plan* for fiscal years 2022-2026 includes a strategic objective to develop and manage data systems and tools to provide objective, reliable, timely, and accessible data to support decision-making, transparency, and accountability.<sup>38</sup> According to the Strategic Plan, expanding the capacity to collect, analyze, and share data with stakeholders and the public will enable DOT to make informed decisions. Additionally, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* state that agencies should process data into current and accurate information to use for making informed decisions and assess progress toward achieving objectives.<sup>39</sup>

DOT and its modal administrations collect and analyze transportation data on topics including safety events—such as collisions, derailments, and evacuations—and infrastructure conditions and locations. For example, FTA officials said they collect fixed route transit network data such as route structure, service frequency, and stop location, but do not collect data specifically on travel and tourism. Similarly, FHWA officials said that, in connection with the Federal Lands Access Program, in order to distribute the program's formula grant funding they gather data on the

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<sup>37</sup> *Managing for Results: A Guide for Using the GPRA Modernization Act to Help Inform Congressional Decision Making*, [GAO-12-621SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jun. 15, 2012).

<sup>38</sup> U.S. Department of Transportation, *Strategic Plan FY2022-2026*, (Washington, D.C.: 2022).

<sup>39</sup> GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sep 10, 2014).

amount of traffic to federal lands from specified federal agencies as required by statute.

However, DOT does not collect comprehensive data specifically on trip purpose, including tourism, to guide the implementation of its *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan*. According to the plan, DOT has not collected data that included all modes of long-distance travel since the Bureau of Transportation Statistics conducted its 1995 American Travel Survey. The survey provided detailed information on state-to-state travel, as well as travel to and from the metropolitan areas by modes of transportation. However, since that time, DOT officials said the Bureau of Transportation Statistics has not collected data on different trip purposes.

Further, DOT has found gaps in its collection of data on long-distance passenger travel across different transportation modes, such as demographic data and information on origins and destinations of travelers.<sup>40</sup> According to DOT, addressing these gaps in its data collection could guide investments in infrastructure such as airports, intercity rail passenger services, and interregional highways, and assist DOT in maximizing the economic benefits of travel and tourism.

DOT officials said that they have not collected comprehensive data specifically on travel and tourism because they have not identified what is needed to support their efforts in the *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan*. Moreover, DOT officials also said they do not collect comprehensive data specifically on travel and tourism because it has not been a separate priority from DOT's work to facilitate mobility. While DOT officials have noted that travel and tourism is not explicitly identified as a priority among the statutory responsibilities of the modal administrations, over the past 7 years, Congress has expanded DOT's responsibilities related to travel and tourism. Further, DOT's plan notes that without more recent data on travel and tourism—such as on trip purpose, mode use, travel party size, and other socioeconomic and demographic data—DOT, transportation planners, and other decision-makers do not have the information necessary to make informed

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<sup>40</sup>U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, *Transportation Statistics Annual Report 2016*, (Washington, D.C.: 2016) accessed Mar. 17, 2023. <https://rosap.ntl.bts.gov/view/dot/32787>. DOT officials said the Bureau of Transportation Statistics had identified some data challenges related to travel and tourism data. See U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, *U.S. International Travel and Transportation Trends* (Washington, D.C.: 2002) and *U.S. International Travel and Transportation Trends*, (Washington, D.C.: September 2006).

decisions about travel and tourism infrastructure. For example, representatives of the U.S. Travel Association told us the lack of available data on travel and tourism—especially data on long-haul travel via automobile, which may not clearly differentiate between freight, local, and non-local automobile travelers—presents challenges to transportation planning activities. These activities may involve consideration of land use, development, safety, and security for transportation decisions.

In addition, some DOT officials said collecting data on travel and tourism could be technically challenging and resource intensive. For example, FHWA officials said it would be difficult to separate data for travel and tourism user volume from data for total highway user volume. While FHWA officials said they are statutorily required to collect data on traffic to federal lands in connection with the Federal Lands Access Program, they have no available metric for travel and tourism in their programs. According to FRA officials, collecting data on travel and tourism would require significant resources, and senior leadership would need to determine FRA's priorities and approach in this area. While DOT officials stated that collecting data on travel and tourism could be technically challenging and resource intensive, it may be possible for DOT to leverage data from the Department of Commerce to inform their decision-making and understand what data is feasible to collect. DOT officials said they have been working with the Bureau of Transportation Statistics and the John A. Volpe National Transportation Systems Center to better understand these issues since 2023. However, DOT lacks information about key aspects of the data needed to support its efforts, including whether the data are available, what barriers exist to collecting data and how those barriers could be overcome, and the extent to which travel and tourism data are collected by other agencies, such as the Department of Commerce.

By developing a plan to identify and obtain additional data on travel and tourism, DOT could provide valuable information for DOT and recipients of federal transportation grant funding on the effects of travel and tourism investments. Such a plan could also allow DOT to tailor its data collection efforts to support the goals developed in its *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan*. Without additional data specifically on travel and tourism, DOT is limited in its ability to make informed decisions when implementing activities in support of any travel and tourism goals that it identifies.

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## Conclusions

Travel and tourism is vital to the U.S. economy, generating trillions in economic output and supporting millions of American jobs. However, the pandemic had serious negative effects on the travel and tourism industry. Direct support or funding for travel and tourism has not historically been a major part of DOT's responsibilities, though states and other grantees have used a variety of DOT grant programs to develop transportation projects that facilitate travel and tourism. In recent years, Congress has expanded DOT's responsibilities in this area, and aimed to use infrastructure investments to help the travel and tourism industry recover. This included directing DOT to establish a strategic plan for travel and tourism infrastructure.

However, DOT has not prioritized or fully implemented its new travel and tourism responsibilities. Currently, DOT's plan lacks key elements that could help it define its role in supporting travel and tourism, including goals and the strategies and resources needed to achieve them. Additionally, despite acknowledging the importance of such information, DOT has not collected comprehensive data on travel and tourism to guide its implementation of the plan. This further inhibits DOT's efforts to define the scope of its support for travel and tourism and inform its decision-making. The statutory requirement in the IIJA for DOT to revise the *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan* provides DOT with the opportunity to better articulate its goals related to travel and tourism, defined in accordance with its other responsibilities, and ensure these goals align with congressional interest in this area. Further, and as part of this process, DOT should develop a plan to identify and collect the appropriate data needed to implement this plan. By doing so, DOT will be able to more clearly articulate its vision and make informed decisions for supporting travel and tourism.

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## Recommendation for Executive Action

We are making the following two recommendations to DOT:

The Secretary of Transportation should direct the Chief Travel and Tourism Officer to develop and incorporate long- and short-term goals related to travel and tourism into the *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan*, and align these goals with the strategies and resources necessary to achieve them. As part of developing these goals,



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DOT should consult with applicable congressional committees, as appropriate. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of Transportation should direct the Chief Travel and Tourism Officer to develop a plan to identify and obtain additional data on travel and tourism needed to inform the revision and implementation of the *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan*. (Recommendation 2)

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## Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this product to DOT and the Department of Commerce for review and comment. In its comments—reproduced in appendix III—DOT agreed with the recommendations. DOT and the Department of Commerce provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Transportation, the Secretary of Commerce, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-2834 or [RepkoE@gao.gov](mailto:RepkoE@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last

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page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix IV.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Elizabeth Repko", followed by a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Elizabeth Repko  
Director, Physical Infrastructure Issues

## Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report addresses

1. the extent to which Department of Transportation (DOT) grant programs support travel and tourism, and
2. what challenges DOT faces in supporting travel and tourism, and how DOT might address those challenges.

For both objectives, we reviewed documents and interviewed DOT officials, including officials from the modal administrations responsible for the modes DOT identified as most involved in passenger travel. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with officials from state departments of transportation and tourism boards in a non-generalizable selection of eight states, selected to obtain diversity in geographic region and travel and tourism as a share of states' economies. Specifically, to obtain geographic diversity, we selected states from different Census regions (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West). To obtain diversity in travel and tourism as a share of states' economies, we used Census data to identify the number of jobs in each state in industries identified by the Census Bureau as related to travel, tourism, and outdoor recreation and divided that number by the total number of jobs in each state.<sup>1</sup> Following this calculation, we categorized each state as having a high, middle, or low share of travel and tourism in its economy, and selected states from each of these categories.

We also conducted semi-structured interviews with representatives of 14 travel and tourism industry stakeholder groups, selected to obtain diversity in factors including transportation modes, aspects of the travel and tourism industry, and whether a group represented industry, consumers, organized labor, Tribes, or historically disadvantaged populations. Although the results of our interviews are not generalizable,

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<sup>1</sup>Industries the Census Bureau identifies as related to travel, tourism, and outdoor recreation include air transportation; scenic and sightseeing transportation; performing arts, spectator sports, and related industries; museums, historical Sites, and similar institutions; amusement, gambling, and recreation industries; accommodation; and food services and drinking places.

**Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology**

they provide varied perspectives on DOT’s support for travel and tourism.  
(See table 2 for the stakeholders we interviewed.)

**Table 2: Travel and Tourism Stakeholders Interviewed**

<b>Type of organization</b>	<b>Stakeholder</b>
U.S Department of Transportation	Federal Aviation Administration
U.S Department of Transportation	Federal Highway Administration
U.S Department of Transportation	Federal Railroad Administration
U.S Department of Transportation	Federal Transit Administration
U.S Department of Transportation	Office of the Secretary of Transportation
State departments of transportation	California Department of Transportation (Caltrans)
State departments of transportation	Florida Department of Transportation
State departments of transportation	Georgia Department of Transportation
State departments of transportation	Michigan Department of Transportation
State departments of transportation	Missouri Department of Transportation
State departments of transportation	Nevada Department of Transportation
State departments of transportation	Pennsylvania Department of Transportation
State departments of transportation	Vermont Agency of Transportation
State tourism boards	Explore Georgia
State tourism boards	Missouri Division of Tourism
State tourism boards	Pennsylvania Tourism Office
State tourism boards	Travel Michigan
State tourism boards	Travel Nevada
State tourism boards	Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development
State tourism boards	Visit California
State tourism boards	Visit Florida
Industry stakeholders	Air Line Pilots Association
Industry stakeholders	Airports Council International-North America
Industry stakeholders	American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials

**Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology**

<b>Type of organization</b>	<b>Stakeholder</b>
Industry stakeholders	American Automobile Association (AAA)
Industry stakeholders	American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)
Industry stakeholders	American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association
Industry stakeholders	American Public Transportation Association
Industry stakeholders	American Society of Travel Advisors
Industry stakeholders	Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations
Industry stakeholders	Blacks in Travel and Tourism
Industry stakeholders	Global Business Travel Association
Industry stakeholders	Open Doors Organization
Industry stakeholders	Rail Passengers Association
Industry stakeholders	U.S. Travel Association

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105967

To determine the extent to which DOT grant programs support travel and tourism, we reviewed relevant literature and available DOT documents—such as notices of funding opportunity—to identify DOT grant programs that have provisions to support travel and tourism, as well as other programs that fund projects with travel and tourism benefits in fiscal years 2017 through 2022. Additionally, we reviewed statutes describing criteria related to travel and tourism for DOT discretionary grant programs identified as having provisions to support travel and tourism and interviewed stakeholders.

For four of the DOT grant programs identified as having provisions to support travel and tourism, we identified projects DOT had selected to receive a grant for reasons partly related to travel and tourism.<sup>2</sup> We performed a content analysis of available information on DOT’s decisions in those programs (e.g., selection memos and project fact sheets). To do so, we applied a set of criteria to determine whether or not DOT had selected a project for reasons partly related to travel and tourism. For example, we identified projects as being selected partly for reasons related to travel and tourism if the decision documents included references to “tourism,” “tourist,” or “long-distance passenger travel.” Two

<sup>2</sup>DOT identified six grant programs as having statutory or administrative provisions to evaluate or assess the extent to which projects benefit travel and tourism, including the National Scenic Byways, Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE), National Infrastructure Project Assistance Program (Mega), Nationally Significant Multimodal Freight and Highway Projects (INFRA), and Rural Surface Transportation Grant and Metropolitan Planning programs. In the Metropolitan Planning Program, recipient metropolitan planning organizations must consider projects and strategies that will, among other things, enhance travel and tourism.

analysts each independently applied the criteria to the decision documents. In cases where the analysts disagreed on whether DOT had selected a project for reasons partly related to travel and tourism, a third analyst applied the criteria to act as a tie-breaker.

We determined the amount of funding DOT had provided to support travel and tourism through its grant programs for fiscal year 2022 by analyzing available DOT grant information such as notices of funding opportunity, selection memos, and project fact sheets. For discretionary grant programs identified as having provisions to support travel and tourism, we determined the amount awarded to projects selected partly for reasons related to travel and tourism. To describe the effects, if any, of the travel and tourism-related evaluation criteria added to the RAISE program by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) in 2021, we determined the total amount awarded through this program for fiscal years 2017 through 2022, as well as the amount awarded to projects selected partly for reasons related to travel and tourism. For other programs with benefits for travel and tourism, we determined the total amount DOT made available through these programs for fiscal year 2022.

To identify what challenges DOT faces in supporting travel and tourism, and how DOT might address those challenges, we reviewed DOT's *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan* to identify its goals for supporting travel and tourism and activities to achieve those goals. We also analyzed DOT's *Strategic Plan for FY2018-2022* and DOT's *Strategic Plan for FY2022-2026* to identify agency-wide strategic goals and any efforts related to supporting travel and tourism. We compared DOT's *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan* to leading practices for agency strategic plans. Specifically, we compared DOT's plan to three critical strategic planning issues related to strategic goals.<sup>3</sup>

To further identify challenges to DOT's support for travel and tourism, as well as DOT's efforts to address them, we reviewed DOT's National Advisory Committee on Travel and Tourism Infrastructure Final Report

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<sup>3</sup>GAO, *Managing for Results: Critical Issues for Improving Federal Agencies' Strategic Plans*, [GAO/GGD-97-180](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 16, 1997). Specifically, we compared DOT's plan to three leading practices identified in this report: (1) link long- and short-term goals, (2) develop long-term goals for major functions and activities, and (3) develop strategies explaining how long-term strategic goals will be achieved. We selected these practices based on their relevance to DOT's plan. We excluded three other leading practices from our review.

and interviewed DOT officials and other stakeholders.<sup>4</sup> We compared DOT's efforts to address barriers to its support for travel and tourism to requirements related to travel and tourism in the IIJA, DOT's *Strategic Plan for FY2022-2026* and *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan*, and *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*. Specifically, we compared DOT's efforts to address barriers to its support for travel and tourism to the principle that management should use quality information to achieve the entity's objectives.<sup>5</sup>

We conducted this performance audit from March 2022 to May 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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<sup>4</sup>U.S. Department of Transportation, *National Advisory Committee on Travel and Tourism Infrastructure Final Report* (Washington, D.C.: 2020). The National Advisory Committee on Travel and Tourism Infrastructure was established by the Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act to advise DOT on issues related to the use of the national intermodal transportation network to facilitate travel and tourism. The Committee is comprised of 15 members, drawn from both the private and public sectors and appointed by the Secretary of Transportation to serve a 2-year term.

<sup>5</sup>U.S. Department of Transportation, *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan for FY2020–2024* (Washington, D.C.: January 2021) and GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

## Appendix II: Additional DOT Grant Programs Identified by DOT and Selected Stakeholders That May Benefit Travel and Tourism

Department of Transportation (DOT) officials and selected stakeholders identified 19 DOT discretionary and formula grant programs that may provide travel and tourism benefits, even though these programs do not explicitly mention travel and tourism in their program goals or evaluation criteria.<sup>1</sup> For fiscal year 2022, DOT made nearly \$68 billion in funding available for these programs. While stakeholders identified these programs as having benefits for travel and tourism, there may be additional programs that also have such benefits.

**Table 3: DOT Programs Identified as Potentially Having Travel and Tourism Benefits by DOT Officials and Selected Stakeholders**

Modal administration	Program name	Program description	Fiscal year 2022 funding
Federal Aviation Administration	Airport Improvement Program	Provides grants for the planning and development of public-use airports.	\$3.7 billion
Federal Aviation Administration	Airport Infrastructure Grant program	Funds investments in runways, taxiways, safety and sustainability projects, as well as terminal, airport-transit connections and roadway projects.	\$2.9 billion
Federal Aviation Administration	Airport Terminal Program	Funds airport terminal development projects that address the aging infrastructure of the nation's airports.	\$1 billion
Federal Highway Administration	Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement program	Provides funding for projects and programs that help meet the requirements of the Clean Air Act.	\$2.5 billion
Federal Highway Administration	Emergency Relief program	Funds the repair or reconstruction of federal-aid highways and roads on federal lands damaged by natural disasters and catastrophic events.	\$100 million

<sup>1</sup>For additional information on how these programs were identified, see appendix I.



**Appendix II: Additional DOT Grant Programs  
Identified by DOT and Selected Stakeholders  
That May Benefit Travel and Tourism**

<b>Modal administration</b>	<b>Program name</b>	<b>Program description</b>	<b>Fiscal year 2022 funding</b>
Federal Highway Administration	Federal Lands Access Program	Funds the improvement of transportation facilities that provide access to, are adjacent to, or are located within federal lands, with an emphasis on high-use recreation sites and economic generators.	\$286 million
Federal Highway Administration	Federal Lands Transportation Program	Funds projects on federal lands transportation facilities, including those that provide access to national forests and national parks.	\$422 million
Federal Highway Administration	Ferry Boat Program	Provides funding to construct ferry boats, ferry terminals, and ferry maintenance facilities.	\$172 million
Federal Highway Administration	National Highway Performance Program	Provides support for, among other things, performance and construction activities on the National Highway System including bicycle transportation and pedestrian walkways.	\$28.4 billion
Federal Highway Administration	Surface Transportation Block Grant program	Funds projects that preserve and improve conditions on federal-aid highways, pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, and transit capital projects, among other things.	\$13.8 billion
Federal Highway Administration	Transportation Alternatives (set-aside)	Funds a variety of generally smaller-scale projects such as pedestrian and bicycle facilities; construction of overlooks and viewing areas; and community improvements such as historic preservation.	
Federal Highway Administration	Recreational Trails Program (set-aside)	Provides funds to develop and maintain recreational trails and facilities.	
Federal Railroad Administration	Federal-State Partnership for Intercity Passenger Rail Grants	Provides funding to improve performance or expand new intercity passenger rail service, among other things.	\$8.7 billion
Federal Railroad Administration	Corridor Identification and Development Program (set-aside)	Funds the development of intercity passenger rail corridors.	
Federal Railroad Administration	Restoration and Enhancement Grant program	Funds grants for initiating, restoring, or enhancing intercity passenger rail.	\$100 million
Federal Transit Administration	Buses and Bus Facilities Competitive Program	Provides support to replace, rehabilitate and purchase buses and related equipment and construct bus-related facilities.	\$960 million
Federal Transit Administration	Capital Investment Grants program	Funds transit capital investments, including heavy rail, commuter rail, light rail, streetcars, and bus rapid transit.	\$4.6 billion
Federal Transit Administration	Passenger Ferry Grant program	Supports passenger ferry systems in urbanized areas.	\$36.5 million
Office of the Secretary	Small Community Air Service Development Program	Provides funding to help small communities address air service and airfare issues.	\$15 million

Source: Department of Transportation (DOT) officials and industry stakeholders. | GAO-23-105967

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# Appendix III: Comments from the Department of Transportation

**Appendix III: Comments from the Department  
of Transportation**



**U.S. Department of  
Transportation**  
Office of the Secretary  
of Transportation

Assistant Secretary  
for Administration

1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE  
Washington, DC 20590

Elizabeth Repko  
Director, Physical Infrastructure  
U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO)  
441 G Street NW  
Washington, DC 20548

DATE: May 4, 2023

Dear Ms. Repko:

The President's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) makes historic investments in our nation's infrastructure and competitiveness, with meaningful and long-lasting benefits for travel and tourism infrastructure across all 50 states, U.S. territories, and tribal communities. It will rebuild America's roads, bridges, and rails, upgrade and expand public transit, modernize the nation's ports and airports, and improve safety. This funding, together with the Inflation Reduction Act, will help enhance the operation and efficiency of our Nation's transportation system and improve the experience of travelers, including in regions with a strong tourism industry and in places with scenic, less traveled roads. Over the past year, DOT has announced more than \$185 billion in funding and made available billions more in competitive programs, with more than 6,900 projects planned or underway.

In 2022, the Department of Commerce (Commerce) updated the National Travel and Tourism Strategy with input from the Department. This new strategy aims to support economic growth in travel and tourism, under the leadership of the Tourism Policy Council (TPC), which is chaired by the Secretary of Commerce and includes the Secretary of Transportation as a member. Consistent with Commerce's whole-of-government strategy, and to fulfill the requirements of BIL, the Department plans to update the DOT National Travel and Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan (NTTISP) by the end of 2023. Further, as required by BIL, in February 2023 the Department appointed the Chief Travel and Tourism Officer. The Director of the Office of International Transportation and Trade has been appointed to this important role.

Upon review of the GAO's draft report, we concur with the two recommendations to (1) develop goals specifically related to travel and tourism and incorporate them into the NTTISP, and (2) develop a plan to identify and obtain additional data on travel and tourism needed to revise and implement the NTTISP. We will provide a detailed response to each recommendation within 180 days of the final report's issuance.

We appreciate the opportunity to respond to the GAO draft report. Please contact Gary Middleton, Director of Audit Relations and Program Improvement, at (202) 366-6512 with any questions or if you would like to obtain additional details.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Philip McNamara".

Philip McNamara  
Assistant Secretary for Administration

# Accessible Text for Appendix III: Comments from the Department of Transportation

DATE: May 4, 2023

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Director, Physical Infrastructure  
U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO)  
441 G Street NW  
Washington, DC 20548

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Sincerely,

Philip McNamara  
Assistant Secretary for Administration

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## Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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### GAO Contact

Elizabeth Repko, (202) 512-2834 or [repkoe@gao.gov](mailto:repkoe@gao.gov)

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### Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Matt Voit (Assistant Director), Adam Gomez (Analyst in Charge), Amy Abramowitz, Paul Aussendorf, Geoffrey Hamilton, Gina Hoover, Chaya Johnson, Chloe Kay, Dan Luo, Malika Rice, James Russell, and Laurel Voloder made key contributions to this report.

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