



Small Cities, Big Moves

*Successes and challenges of public transportation in
small urban areas*

TRANSIT WORKS
— FOR AMERICA —

Who we are

Just Strategy builds powerful issue campaigns that win. We educate organizers and movement leaders. We help develop effective strategies for racial and economic justice movements.

We create innovative organizing projects where we see a need. We also partner with established organizations to build people's power.

Current campaigns include: National Campaign for Transit Justice, Transit Works for America, and Communities for Our Colleges.

Why small cities?

TRANSIT WORKS
— FOR AMERICA —

Why small cities

- In 2023, more than **7 billion trips were taken on America's public transit systems**, in towns, cities, and rural areas across the country.
- **Demand for transit is growing**, as the cost of car ownership increases and fewer young people express interest in driving. Moreover, as America's population ages, an increasing number of people will lose the desire or ability to drive.



Why small cities

- Transit provides an **affordable option** that allows everyone—including older adults, people with disabilities, youth, and people without cars—to continue participating in the economic and social life of their community.
- To meet this demand, **transit leaders are finding innovative ways to provide service.** Too often, however, these agencies must make **difficult trade-offs, shifting and even cutting services as resources are insufficient.**

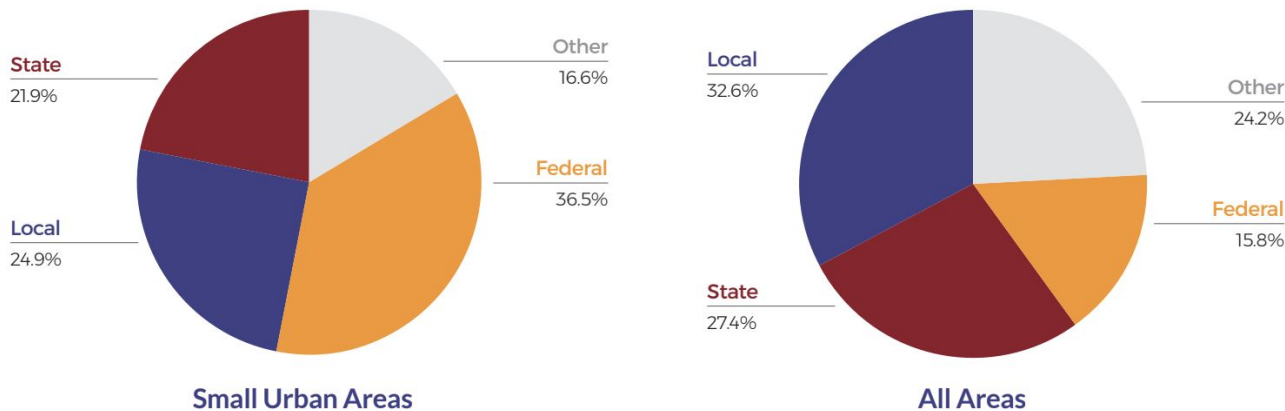
Why small cities

- This report focuses on transit in small cities—places with **populations between 50,000 and 200,000**, of which there are **over 300 in the United States**. Transit serves an essential role in these communities, yet they are rarely studied.
- As Congress prepares to reauthorize the federal transit program, we offer this report to highlight this important segment of the nation's transit services.

Why small cities

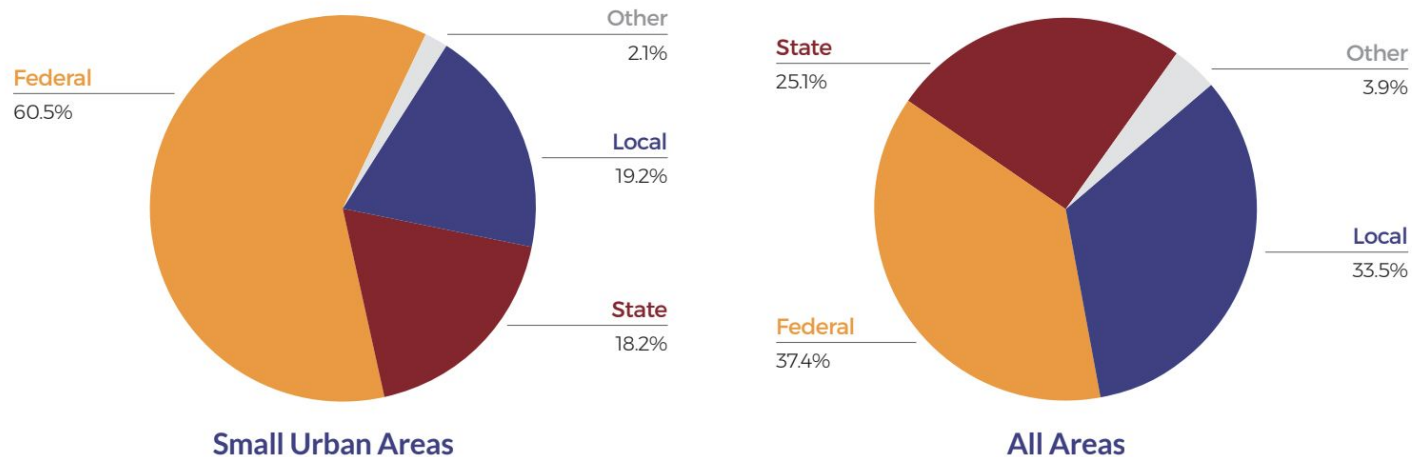
The federal reauthorization is especially important for these areas, which rely more heavily on transit funding from the federal government than their larger counterparts.

Figure 1: Operating Expenditures by Funding Source, 2023



Why small cities

Figure 2: Capital Expenditures by Funding Source, 2023



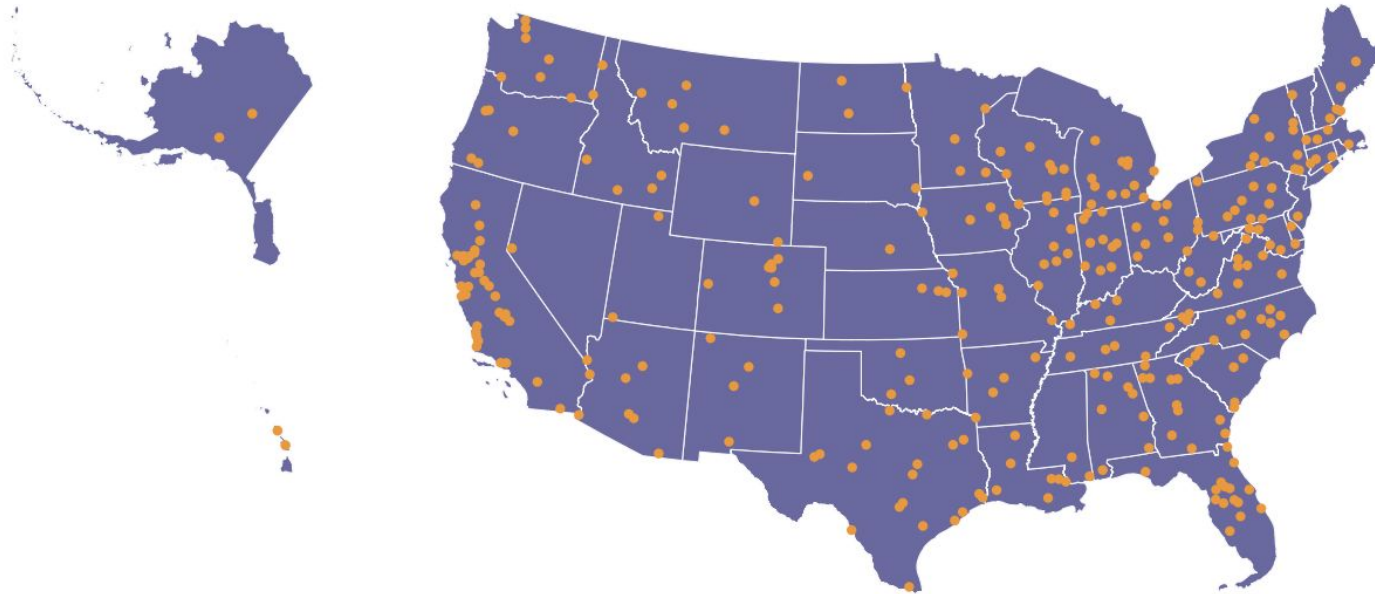
Why small cities

- While **small cities vary significantly in their physical and cultural characteristics**, many of them include features such as historical dependence on a single industry, location near recreational areas, or the presence of a college or university as a major driver of population growth.
- They often serve as the **regional hub for surrounding rural areas**, offering health care, shopping, and other services not available in smaller towns.

Why small cities

- **Small urban areas** are located in **49 states** (all but Rhode Island), Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Virgin Islands.
- Transit in these areas covers a **wide range of geographies**, from the six-square-mile area served by the City of Shelby, Ohio, to the 15,355 square miles served by the Concho Valley Transit District in San Angelo, Texas.
- These areas provided **170,635,266 trips in 2023**, which was **72% of pre-pandemic ridership**. Ridership has continued to recover since the pandemic and in 2023 was up 17% from the year before.

Why small cities



Why small cities

- Many agencies run **multiple types of service**, such as fixed routes that run between major destinations and demand-response options serving communities outside the city center.



“Small urban transit is the ‘anti-Goldilocks’—too small for the big cities but too big to really be rural.”

– Michael Whitten
Executive Director
Manchester Transit Authority

As a result, small urban transit systems must work every day to find the approach that is “just right” for them.

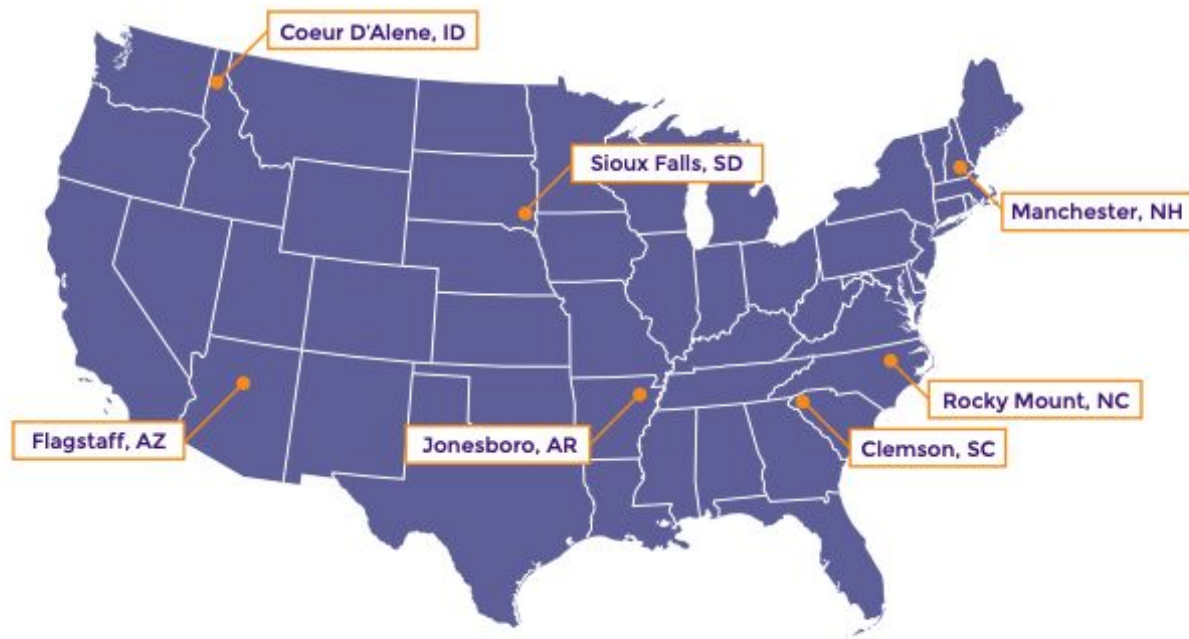
Case studies

TRANSIT WORKS
— FOR AMERICA —

Case studies

- To gain further insight into the state of transit in small urban communities, we developed **seven case studies exploring the role transit plays in their economies and quality of life**, as well as the **opportunities and challenges** they see ahead.
- The case study cities were selected based on several factors, including the performance of their transit systems and their location in different parts of the country.
- We recognize that small urban cities vary widely, and **these seven case studies cannot fully represent all the various circumstances communities of this size face**. Still, we believe these examples are useful for building an understanding of the landscape of small urban cities and their transit needs.

Case studies



Case study themes

- In every one of the case study cities, **transit plays a critical role in supporting the local economy**, regardless of the type of industries present. Case study cities used transit to support manufacturing, health care, education, and tourism, among others.
- **Small urban systems are modernizing**, upgrading technology, and improving the customer experience, **leading to increased ridership**. The case study cities have seen consistent growth since the pandemic as customers respond to these improvements.
- Small urban cities are often the **regional hub for surrounding rural areas**, and **transit is an essential link between highly rural locations and regional services**.

Case study themes

- Transit agencies that serve small urban cities often have **less-dense bureaucracies** than their larger counterparts, which allows them to be **more nimble in meeting changing travel patterns and demand**.
- Strong local partnerships have enabled **greater efficiency and increased transit's ability to meet the demands** of the local economy.
- While progress is being made, **funding constraints are inhibiting progress** and leaving unmet demand, reducing productivity and increasing household costs.

Coeur d'Alene, Idaho

- Urbanized area with a population of **121,831**.
- Rapid growth due to its popularity as an outdoor recreation destination, attracting remote workers and retirees.
- **Idaho does not provide state funding** for public transit.
- Transit service is closely coordinated between the county and the Coeur d'Alene Tribe.



“[We are] trying to sell transit on a daily, weekly, monthly basis”

– Chad Ingle
Program Manager
Kootenai County Public Transit

The state of Idaho doesn't contribute any funds to Citylink. There are limited options for raising local dollars beyond soliciting local matches from communities within the service area each year.

Coeur d'Alene, Idaho

- Project SEARCH
 - High school transition program provides education and training to young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
 - Participants and graduates often use public transit, which can limit the jobs that are accessible
 - Shabby Fabrics
 - Online quilting shop
 - Recently relocated its headquarters from Coeur d'Alene to neighboring Post Falls to expand its warehouse space
 - New warehouse is no longer served by Citylink

“My dad is not always going to be available. So, that means if I didn’t have access to the bus, I would be kind of stuck.”

– Bryce
Project SEARCH graduate
Citylink rider

A recent Project SEARCH graduate, Bryce, uses Citylink to get to his job at Les Schwab Tire Center in Hayden. Bryce says that the bus gives him his independence. He doesn’t have a car, and his only other way to get to work is to have his dad drive him.

Flagstaff, AZ

- A fast-growing urbanized area with a **population of 79,842**.
- 83% of city residents live within $\frac{3}{4}$ mile of transit.
- Ridership grew from FY '22 to FY '23 by 21%.
- Known for year-round outdoor recreation, it attracts both residents and visitors.
- Home to health care facilities, educational institutions, and diverse businesses, driving economic growth.



Flagstaff, AZ

- **Mountain Line did not cut service during the pandemic** but still saw a 50% decrease in ridership across the system.
- Ridership has come back since, but the agency has at times had to restrict service due to workforce challenges.
 - Flagstaff Unified School District was facing similar challenges
 - FSUD eliminated yellow bus service for out-of-district middle school students and all high school students within the city limits
 - FUSD partnered with Mountain Line to encourage those students to ride the city buses instead, using passes supplied by FUSD.
 - Now, more than 1,000 students (about 60% of those eligible) are now riding public transit to school.

Flagstaff, AZ

- In November 2024, **voters in Flagstaff approved a nearly 70% increase in the portion of the sales tax dedicated to transit**, bringing it to a half-cent per dollar and allowing the city to continue supporting Mountain Line's 5-year growth plan.
- While city and county contributions and rider fares contribute to Mountain Line's success, **federal funding provides the majority of Mountain Line's resources**.

Recommendations

TRANSIT WORKS
— FOR AMERICA —

Recommendations

Congress should increase funding for transit service in both the urban and rural programs.

Several of the case study cities make use of funding from both programs, as they serve small urban as well as rural areas.

This funding would enable transit systems in these communities to meet a greater portion of the demand than they can today.

Recommendations

Congress should reduce barriers to using federal funding efficiently by empowering transit providers to blend funding from multiple federal programs.

Funding for transit is available from a variety of federal agencies, including not only the U.S. Department of Transportation but also the Veterans Administration, Department of Defense, and Department of Health and Human Services. Today, many of these federal funds come with strings attached that prevent transit providers from effectively coordinating different types of services.

Recommendations

Congress should make it easier to use federal funding for transit by reducing the local match required for operating funding from 50% to 20%.

Most federal transportation funding requires a 20% match. Reducing the match for transit operations funding would help small communities stretch their limited resources further.

Recommendations

Congress should fund the Federal Transit Administration to develop a team of experts who can be deployed to support staff at transit agencies that serve small urban areas.

These technical experts should have specialized knowledge of strategies appropriate to areas of this size so that they can advise agencies that are expanding or modernizing their systems.