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The New Language of Mobility: Talking Transportation in a Post-Recession World



Volume 2, Supplement to "Making the Case for Transportation Investment and Revenue", produced under the National Cooperative Highway Research Program, NCHRP 20-24 (62)A.

March 2011

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Post-Recession World

*Volume 2, Supplement to "Making the Case
for Transportation Investment and Revenue",
produced under the National Cooperative
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*See also Volume 1, Strategies and
Messages: Three Case Studies of Successful
Campaigns to Raise Revenue for
Transportation.*

March 2011

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Preface

This report is the second volume of a two-part study (NCHRP 20-24(62)A) that considered three recent transportation revenue increases and analyzed the strategies and messages that led to their successes.

In Volume 1, the Parsons Brinckerhoff team reports on the strategies and messages from the perspective of participants who were close to these successful initiatives and who recounted the story through a series of in-depth interviews.

In this volume, the Maslansky-Luntz team begins with messages that were used in the three success stories and builds upon them in testing a variety of messages with focus groups of “opinion influencers” in three U.S. cities. These listening sessions were then followed by a session with a “Washington insiders” proxy group where a unique Instant Response Dial technology was used to measure responses to a range of messages.

With only four sessions, the observations made in this report are necessarily generalized – and are no substitute for detailed research in any jurisdictions where a new transportation measure is being proposed. Each and every context is different.

Overview: Red Light, Green Light

“Traffic makes me feel trapped...it deprives me of my time and my freedom.”

-D.C. Participant

When we began this research, we expected a rough road.

It would be hard to overstate the national mood against large government programs or new taxes right now, for any reason.

But we found there is **a new way to talk about transportation** that, if done correctly, can not only generate support for revenue increases, it can get people excited about them. But first you have to acknowledge some fundamental truths:

- Distrust of Washington and big government means all decisions need to be perceived as being made at the state and local levels – not federally driven.
- The priorities of AASHTO and other transportation professionals are different from those of voters and taxpayers. So you must adopt language that is relevant to them, which means the traditional messages about maintenance and even relieving congestion simply aren't going to be as effective right now.

To succeed, you must provide a vision of how things can and should be. Once, driving across America was the essence of freedom. You could move in a way not possible in other developed countries. But over time, as everything else has gotten faster, and cars still move at the same speed, transportation has become something that seems relatively restrictive. It hasn't evolved with the times. It's holding us back.

It is, in effect, a red light.

The solution, as far as citizens are concerned, is to make transportation more technologically advanced, more efficient. To increase the green lights they encounter.

There's a word for this kind of free, unrestricted movement: **MOBILITY**.

Transportation experts commonly use the word “mobility.” But in an age of increasingly mobile technology, “mobility” may have a different meaning than it does within the professional community.

To succeed, you cannot address funding initiatives using the language of tax and revenue; it's about the benefits of what those dollars will bring, and one of the most resonant benefits is the ability to be more mobile.

We found that if you effectively communicate the value of a smarter, more efficient transportation system that addresses the powerlessness and limitations imposed by the current system, then people are actually willing to PAY FOR those benefits. This is an important messaging distinction: People may not support “raising revenue” or taxes, but **they are willing to “pay for” things that are important to them.**

Your strongest message is one that capitalizes on a word the technology industry has turned into a synonym for freedom. We now have mobile phones and mobile computing that let us do in a park or our living rooms what we used to need an office for.

Mobility and technology aren't the extent of the transportation story, though. People also want to know that it will be sustainable – both physically and financially. That it will be locally driven and guarantee accountable spending. That it will provide jobs and develop the economy. And they don't want to hear about routine maintenance.

It's important to note that the scope of our research was limited. We went to three major metropolitan areas (Charlotte, Denver, Orlando) where employment and the economy are doing relatively well, and where residents aren't all that angry about traffic congestion. And while we also spoke to people in Washington, D.C., where traffic is bad, people inside the Beltway don't always think like the rest of the country. These cities were chosen because, among other things, they are representative of much of the country. But we didn't study any rural areas, or any areas hit particularly hard by the recession. For these reasons, it's important to take these recommendations as a guide, and to keep in mind that crafting plans for specific states or metropolitan areas is going to require research specific to the issues and concerns of those residents.

With that said, we've developed a communications strategy that can be tailored to excite people across the country about the possibility of a better transportation experience.

The Five Keys to Transportation Funding

- 1. Sustainable mobility**
- 2. Technology and modernization**
- 3. Long-term local planning**
- 4. Accountable spending**
- 5. Jobs and economic development**

The analysis that follows will explain how to use the new language of mobility. The most important thing to remember is that **this discussion should primarily be about the benefits you can add to people’s daily experience.** If you can convince them that you’re providing them with real value, like more efficient roads and highways, they’re willing to pay a fair price for it.

The key is understanding the current mindset of the driving public. For years the conversation about transportation has been about two things: road maintenance and relieving congestion. But people just aren’t finding those compelling right now. Here’s why:

- **Maintenance is table stakes.** They already pay for maintenance. If the system of roads is 60 years old, they think you should be able to sustain them with the money you’ve been collecting for 60 years. They’re not willing to pay more money for what they’re convinced you should already be providing.
- **Every pothole makes you a “liar.”** You’ll never get every road to 100% surface quality. Drivers are far more likely to remember the 18-inch gash at the end of their block than the 18 miles of smooth highway they drive every day. That one pothole counts as evidence that you’re wasting their money. And not doing what you promised that money was for.
- **They assume congestion is the result of an obsolete plan.** Every city we visited, regardless of rush hour length, believes the network of roads and freeways never planned to account for future growth. Regardless of what you might know to the contrary, they believe their traffic problems are the result of short-sighted planning.
- **So they don’t believe in traditional methods for relieving congestion.** To them, adding more lanes is just more quick-fix planning. It means more orange barrels now and new lanes that already aren’t enough by the time they’re completed. What they really want is a new **approach** to relieving congestion.

In this era of media saturation, where every point of view has a public outlet, you need to acknowledge that there is no longer one official set of accepted objective facts. Instead, we live in a time of multiple truths.

your truth	their truth
We’re running a multi-billion dollar deficit in the Highway Trust Fund. Without more money, we won’t be able to maintain roads.	You’ve wasted the money we’ve already given you. Why give you more?
Without more funding, we won’t be able to keep up with population growth.	You should have had a plan for population growth in the first place.
We always expected to have to expand roads and highways as needs dictated.	You’re just playing catch-up by adding more lanes. It’s a broken system.

Because this is the context you're operating in, you need to frame the benefits of supporting any measure as providing a new approach to relieving congestion. What follows will explain how to do that.

As you read, keep in mind that this research, while compelling, is only a start. But the general themes that emerged and the messages that people responded to were consistent across all regions and demographic groups.

Finally, **remember that order matters**. Winning support isn't just about communicating the right words, but about **building your case piece by piece**. Inside the transportation industry, professionals have their own understanding of priorities – of what needs to be stressed or addressed first. But citizens don't necessarily share your priorities. Creating an effective argument depends on building a message that starts with what **they** find most important. The order in which messages are presented in this document is indicative of what works with the audiences we spoke to. But the order and emphasis of the messages will vary based on the specific situation and priorities in each community where a funding initiative is launched. The end of the document contains strategies for tailoring messages for different audiences.

Throughout this document, you'll find highlighted **language to use** and **language to lose**. These represent messages that we tested with various audiences across the country. In some cases, this language came directly from the research that we and Parsons Brinckerhoff did in Oregon, LA County, and Kansas. In other cases, we refined their language, and in a few instances, we felt the need to create entirely new messages. But in every case, we are confident that these passes should be used—or avoided—with audiences for the reasons we explain.

1. Mobility

Because people view traffic as something that restricts their movement, the idea of a transportation plan that makes them more mobile doesn't only justify a new measure, it can get them excited about it.

The main benefit of a long-term plan to modernize our roads and highways is creating a **future of sustainable mobility**. People keep coming back to this key phrase, and so should you. It encapsulates everything that the modern public wants from modern transportation.

language to USE +

We all want a transportation network that makes us more mobile. Mobility gives us the freedom to move around, so we can get where we want to go, when we want to get there. It's about giving us more options.

But the most important part of any plan is that it be sustainable, based on a future-focused, long range plan. We don't know how populations are going to change in the future, or what kinds of innovations are going to come along and change the way we think about travel. So we need a mobility plan that's flexible enough to adjust to changing conditions.

1. **Mobility is modern.** It only makes sense that a public which wants a more modern transportation system latches onto the word "mobility." Many of the most widely adopted technological advancements in the past 10 years have been about making people more mobile. Phones and computers have gone mobile, and the outcome is a consumer that expects to be able to choose **what** he wants to do, **when** he wants to do it, and even **where** he can get it done.

2. **It's really about the freedom to choose.** One of the most important components of what mobility means is the choice that it implies. When people hear the word in the context of transportation, they think primarily about the choice between modes. They can drive if they want, or take a train or bus if there's no place to park, or if traffic will be bad. And each mode will be just as easy to use.

But mobility also implies a choice of *routes* for drivers. If modern technology can tell them exactly which route will save them time, and they can choose to change routes, then **modern technology has actually made them more mobile**. If a modern transportation plan can give them better choices, they're willing to pay for it.

"It's a loss of freedom when I no longer have control of my time and how I spend it."

- D.C. Participant

language to **USE** +

People need the ability to choose their travel options. That's what it means to be mobile.

3. **Mobility is in the eye of the beholder.** The great advantage to talking about mobility is that it's an inherently positive word that every member of your audience will interpret in his or her own way. That's because mobility, to them, is about the freedom to choose what they want. So when they hear that for just a few more dollars a year they can become more mobile, they begin to imagine all the places they wish they could get to more easily.
4. **"Sustainability" isn't just for environmentalists anymore.** When we came across Oregon governor Ted Kulongoski's statement that it was time to discuss the future of "sustainable mobility," we included it in our research to see how different environmental arguments worked. But to our surprise, people don't associate the word "sustainable" with environmentalism in the context of transportation. In fact, even people skeptical of climate change research and opposed to paying anything to combat it were *in favor* of paying for sustainable mobility. In all of our research, not a single participant mentioned the environment when explaining what sustainable meant.

- **“Sustainable” means we can make it last.** Instead, sustainable has reverted back to a broader, more literal meaning: something we can keep going. People believe that one of the big problems with our transportation plans of the past is that they didn’t account for a number of problems we’re experiencing now. So a sustainable plan means one that is workable in the long term.
- **And it means pay-as-you-go.** They also interpret sustainable to mean economically sustainable. Any measures that create sustainable mobility mean we’ll be able to pay for them.

language to USE +

Investments have to be paid for responsibly. While much government spending lately has been financed by borrowing from our children, we cannot borrow our way to a better future. That’s why we’re committed to paying our own way for transportation improvements. Every project we begin will be paid for in full with funds dedicated to our roads and highways.

5. **The tangible benefit of sustainable mobility is more efficient traffic.** When you talk about efficiency, people hear both personal and economic benefits – faster movement of people and goods. They don’t expect traffic to go away. But they do think it’s possible for all those cars to move faster and for some of them to be replaced by mass transit options.

language to USE +

As populations grow, the more congested our roadways become. It results in more time wasted sitting in traffic. We don’t just need more lanes. We need more efficient traffic flow. But we also need rail systems that allow people to travel throughout any region with ease. Seamless connections within the transit system allow people to move from home to work or play and back again.

2. Technology and Modernization

Once you've framed the discussion about new transportation funding as being about providing sustainable mobility, the next question your audience will have is going to be simple: How?

They feel that our transportation infrastructure is outdated, and that means the solution is to modernize it with new technology. And while they expect their current taxes to cover the costs of maintenance, they expect to have to pay more for new technology. And they're perfectly comfortable with that. The following findings will explain the best strategy for talking about the technological advances that are going to bring our transportation system into the modern era.

1. **The future is now. When are the roads?** Remember how when you were a kid they said we were supposed to have flying cars by now? Well, they lied. No flying cars. And nobody is all that upset about it. But just because they aren't demanding cars that drive themselves doesn't mean people think it's okay to have transportation technology that's older than they are. They assume that if you modernize, if you improve our roads technologically, everything else seems to fall into place: safety, congestion, even the economy.

language to **USE** +

What we need is a smart system of infrastructure equal to the needs of the 21st century. A system that encourages sustainable communities with easier access to our jobs, to our schools, to our homes. A system that decreases travel time and increases mobility. A system that cuts congestion and ups productivity.

- *President Obama*

2. **You don't need to part the seas.** When it comes to technology, what people are most interested in is what's already available today. When asked about technology that's still in the development stages – such as cars that can drive themselves, a few people find it attractive, but most think it's unrealistic. In other words, they don't need to see you introduce what *you* might think of as game-changing technology. To them, **small technological advancements are game changing**. Because they view our roads and highways as woefully out of date, just bringing them into 2010 is great. You don't need to bring them into 2050.

language to USE +

Much of the standstill you experience sitting in traffic could be avoided by small improvements in technology. For example, if we could clear traffic accidents and stalled vehicles off the roadway quickly, we can reduce as much as 50 percent of travel delay. This technology isn't science fiction. It exists right now.

Note: The 50% figure cited above came from a speech given by Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski. Respondents in other states responded positively to the concept of technology playing a role in reducing traffic delays and it's reasonable to expect the message to resonate similarly if data is customized based on projections in other regions.

3. **Go greener.** The innovation that generates the most excitement is **better timing for traffic signals that synchronizes green lights**. While this may not be top of mind for most transportation professionals, it's important to keep in mind that every driver knows the frustration of sitting at a red light they think is unnecessary. Sometimes that means leaving a green only to stop at another red a block later. Sometimes it means waiting at a light even though there are no other cars in sight. Regardless of where you live, there are red lights you wish were green. If you can show them that their investment in new transportation funding will mean more green lights on their daily commutes, you'll have their attention, and you'll get farther with that single benefit than any other.

To sit at a stop light when no one is around...it's crazy, it makes you yell. Why can't all these lights be green?"

-D.C. Participant

language to USE +

By better synchronizing traffic lights in urban and suburban areas, we can increase the number of green lights you encounter and make traffic move much more efficiently.

But without an increase in transportation funding, it will be impossible to modernize our nation's roads and highways properly.

4. **Get smarter.** The technology worth the most to us is all getting smarter. As an adjective applied to a phone, “smart” means better connected to the world and keeping you informed of what’s going on in real time. So if you can **talk about smarter traffic networks and routing systems**, people will hear better information about where traffic and accidents are, and consequently, better options for travel around the city.

Keep in mind, smarter *traffic* systems are about moving cars around the city efficiently. But a smarter *transportation* system is about multi-modal transportation – about better synching of road, train and bus information to get them from one place to another faster.

language to USE +

It all begins with data. We’re gathering huge amounts of data, from tolls, traffic patterns, eye witnesses, turnstiles, ticket sales. The trouble is, we’re not using this data efficiently. It’s siloed in separate departments and agencies. You’ll have to become connected in order to make the city smart.

It’s not realistic to assume everything will always happen according to a schedule, which is why the system needs to react in real time. In a smarter transportation system, data is gathered from the trains and buses and synced so that the buses know when to wait for a late train or to send an extra bus when the train does arrive. People get to work on time, the whole system works better.

5. **Keep traffic moving after an accident.** Another technological innovation that may seem small and insignificant to you, but that voters and drivers are very interested in, is the ability to clear accidents from the roads faster. No matter where you live, you’ve been held up by an accident. No one expects delays from accidents to go away, but if you can minimize them, it’s worth the cost of a new transportation bill.

Technology Triad

Q. *“If I could promise you synchronized traffic signals, a smarter traffic system, and technology that clears accidents off the roads faster, would you be willing to pay an extra \$100 a year for that?”*

A. *“I’ll write you a check right now!”*
-Orlando Participant

3. Long-term Local Planning

We often tell clients that the only thing people want to hear about is the end result – the benefit to them when it’s all over. In this case, we’ve found a rare exception. In order to support a new transportation measure, people demand to know about the process – about how this benefit is going to be achieved behind the scenes.

When asked to simply voice their feelings about traffic in their city, many Americans begin by mentioning poor planning in engineering the network of roads and highways. So any request for new funds must be explained as part of a thorough long-term plan that anticipates the future or is at least flexible enough to accommodate it.

But it’s not enough just to have a plan. They also want to know *whose* plan it is. And they simply don’t trust the federal government to get it right. They believe that the only way to create a plan responsibly is to have state leaders, local officials and the business community all represented in the decision making process.

1. **And they think current efforts to relieve congestion are short-term fixes.** They understand that our infrastructure needs work. But the typical methods for alleviating congestion seem like a patch job to them – like using bubble gum and duct tape instead of getting the tools you need. New construction just means more orange barrels. And their experience is that by the time the new lanes are added, the population has already outgrown them.

So you need to explain your plan as one that rethinks the way we approach transportation. For some this will mean more multi-modal options. For other technological innovations that make traffic more efficient. But it’s crucial to get them to understand that you’re not proposing taking more money for more of the same attempts at solutions.

“It’s an old system. We can’t build 20 lanes. So at some point we need to change strategy.”

-Denver Participant

They'd rather have a \$100 per person plan that solves problems for the next 20 years than a \$1 per person plan that solves them for the next 2.

language to USE +
realistic long-term plan

If we're going to tackle transportation, we need a realistic long-term plan that takes future growth into account. We must really think ahead – this isn't about what's needed this year, or even just what is needed this decade. This is about what the nation needs for the next 20 to 40 years.

Another short-term fix isn't going to work. If we're going to take on transportation, we need to...vote to fund a long-term plan that has funding built into America's future.

- 2. Go outside-in, not inside-out.** They're not willing to let just anybody make these plans for them. So the most important thing to keep in mind when describing how this long-term plan will be written is that Washington insiders aren't trusted to make decisions for the rest of the country – even by most Washington insiders! Plans that come from *inside* the Beltway and move out to the people aren't viable. But plans that start *outside* the Beltway can be.

It's important to note that their distrust of federal control doesn't necessarily come only from the political right. Regardless of ideological or party affiliation, some see Washington as broken. Others think it's trying to do good but is so saddled by bickering and complex politics that it can't. So people need to hear that while Washington may collect some of the money, its expenditure won't be in their hands.

"If it's wrong, get rid of it. There's been so much reliance upon Congress and things aren't getting done. Everyone is just arguing about it."

-Denver Participant

"Washington is way too political. Congress is bogged down."

- D.C. Participant

3. **They need to hear their “local” leaders will be in charge.** People believe the best authority on what needs to be done to the roads is the population that drives or depends on them. So they need to hear that new projects are going to be driven by “local” agencies: state departments of transportation, municipal authorities—any group that’s not a federal agency. It’s important to note that what people mean by local isn’t necessarily what you understand it to mean. To them, the word itself is important because it implies that decisions will be made as close to the community level as is reasonable. But they’re happy with the process being overseen by their state departments of transportation or governors.

language to USE +

If we are going to invest billions of public dollars in public infrastructure, then the projects selection process can’t simply be a black box of engineering or political decisions. These decisions need to be made by the people who drive on and pay for the roads. The private sector and general public must have a voice. Local governments, chambers of commerce, advocacy groups for businesses and the environment, and regular private citizens must all be at the table.

“Local groups are closer to the source. They can be more specific. They can tailor the money to the problem.”

- D.C. Participant

“Who knows better than the people who use it? And pay for it?”

-Charlotte Participant

4. **The public and private sectors need to check and balance each other.** So who gets to be on the local committee to decide which projects get funded? They want to know that a diversity of opinions will all be heard and believe that is the only way to ensure that no one interest – public or private – gets a disproportionate benefit.
- They see roads as a government responsibility, so the **governor or state DOT** director should be the face of the program.
 - But they don't believe that government alone, even at the state level, can be trusted to use their money efficiently. **Private businesses** must also have a seat at the table to make sure that projects bring an economic advantage to an area.
 - They also understand the most powerful business in an area can dominate the process, so a **chamber of commerce or other representative group** ensures that the businesses involved represent the whole commercial picture in a region, not just the biggest players.
 - Finally, for-profit businesses aren't the only non-government entities that matter. It's also necessary that **non-profits and environmental groups** be allowed to participate in the planning process.
 - **Private citizens** don't necessarily need to be at the table, but they do need to be able to find out what's going on at any time and register their opinions or ask questions.

"Everyone has an agenda. Neither business nor government should be more powerful. They all have a niche and it's not necessarily what's good for the general public. It's all about checks and balances."
- Denver Participant

Emphasize for your Audience

Conservative Republicans are more likely to **distrust government**, so when explaining the makeup of the project selection committees, lead with and **stress private sector involvement**.

Liberal Democrats are more concerned about **private interests prevailing over the public good**, so with them lead with and **emphasize local government and non-profit involvement**.

But it's important to **both groups** to know that **different views** will all be incorporated.

5. **They don't know how much planning you do.** In Denver, they're fed up with congestion downtown. In Charlotte, they're so-so, but the suburbs and freeway entrances can get a little frustrating. In Orlando, they're pretty happy with their "rush minute." In Washington, D.C., congestion is becoming so unbearable they think of it as infringing on their personal freedom. But in *all four* cities, they believe that the vision for what their city's roads and highways were supposed to look like was **dreamed up long ago, and simply didn't, or couldn't account for modern population growth.**

This fits into their general conception of government: slow and unwieldy, making decisions based on yesterday's information rather than today's. Or based on no information at all, but instead on political favors and horse trading.

We want to stress that while you know this isn't the case, they don't. You may be able to specify to the hour how much planning went into designing the map of each city. But that simply isn't a truth they recognize. You don't need to provide minute details about the planning process – you should however get credit for what you're already doing by communicating in a general sense what that planning process involves; who has a voice and the time horizon you're looking at.

*"It feels like an unplanned sprawl.
I know some areas were just badly planned from the start."
-Charlotte Participant*

language to USE +
Our transportation system just isn't currently equipped to respond to the needs of a global economy, increases in population, and rising energy costs. To address this challenge, we need a comprehensive strategy that reaches statewide, creates jobs, provides for continued investment over the long term.

4. Accountable Spending

Once the value you're bringing to transportation and the thoroughness of your plan have been explained, then you can deal with the most objectionable piece of the message: how the money will be spent. But when framed properly, you can get Democrats and even moderate Republicans to listen to you. The key is going to be promising accountable spending that is transparent enough to allow citizens to check details whenever they want to.

While the previous three chapters explain the ways you need to frame this discussion, convincing people that spending will be accountable and transparent is crucial. If they don't believe these things, the whole issue is a non-starter. Here are the 6 things to understand when talking about accountability and transparency.

1. **The funds must be dedicated to transportation.** They've seen it before: citizens grudgingly vote for new taxes because they admit they really do need something, only to have that money hijacked by politicians or bureaucrats and spent elsewhere. One of the most common questions skeptics have about any new highway funding is, "How do we know it's going to go to what you promised?"

"If that's what we gave them the money for, they better damn well use it for that."

-Orlando Participant

So in order to get them to buy in, you have to begin by convincing them that the money is going to be dedicated to transportation. We're not necessarily talking about lists of specific projects here (we'll get to that later) but about making it illegal to spend new transportation revenues on anything other than transportation.

language to USE +

We all know that in the past, we've voted for tax increases for good causes just to have the money hijacked later for something we didn't vote for. No one will be able to appropriate these funds for their own purposes. Tough financial controls will ensure funding goes to transportation and can't be diverted by politicians.

2. **Read my lips: no new bureaucracy.** While people do want to see a mixed representative body deciding where and how money will be spent, you can't make that body sound like another government agency. People are opposed to the idea of a Transportation Utility Commission being established to govern new revenues not because of its composition (they don't even know what that might be), but because it sounds like more wasteful bureaucratic red tape. This isn't a party-specific concern, either. You should make the supervision of the project selection process sound as little like a new government entity as possible.

language to LOSE -

To address the problems [of funding decisions being scattered among local and state entities], new funding will be tied to new Transportation Utility Commissions, modeled on the Public Utility Commissions. They will have limited powers initially to develop a report that documents all road assets.

language to USE +

We need to ensure that this tax increase won't grow government.
It will grow the private sector.

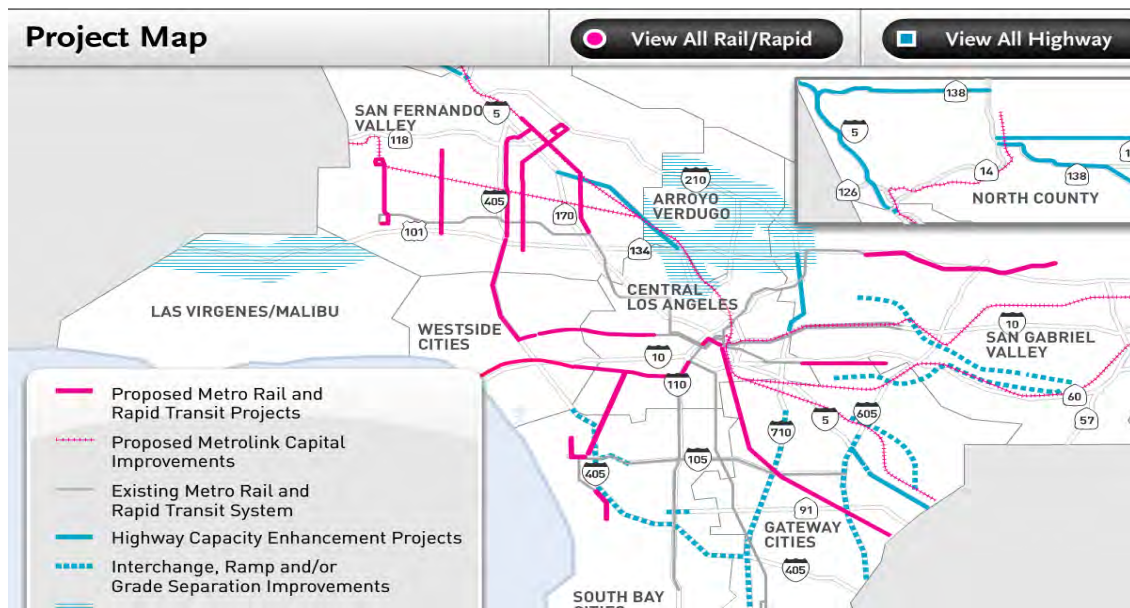
3. **Transparency means letting them know. Everything.** The third piece of the accountability puzzle is transparency. Before they're willing to give you more money, they want to know that they're going to be able to see every relevant piece of information about every project they'll be funding.

Whether they'll actually go and *look* at this information is another story. But they want to know they could, or that the press can alert them of waste. They want to be able to see which projects you're working on, what dates you'll be working, what it's going to cost, how much the area will benefit from it, and which contractors you're using. And they want to be able to contact you if they have questions or comments.

"The cost of making that information available is miniscule compared to the amount of money being spent on these projects. If they're going to ask us for more taxes, it's necessary to provide transparency."
- Denver Participant

- 4. Let them visualize the projects with interactive maps.** In our research we came across an interactive map that LA county uses to give citizens information on road and rail construction. It's interactive, colorful, easy to use, and shows them exactly where work is going to be done. It is, essentially, a much better and easier to use project list.

People think it's a great...start. While they love the interactive map and say they would use it, they don't think it gives them nearly enough information. They want to be able to click on a road, see exactly what the start and end dates will be for construction, and what the budget figures are. And even though you know that no scheduling is ever 100% certain, they're not happy with "To Be Determined" as an answer to anything. If they're giving you more money, they don't think the cost of keeping such a site up-to-date is too much to ask.



You can see more about their suggestions for an interactive map in Appendix B on page 35.

5. **Project lists written into the law will be helpful in some cases but aren't always necessary.** One of the smaller questions we set out to answer was whether or not voters needed to see a list that locked specific projects in before supporting it. While the Parsons Brinckerhoff team will have far more specific insights on the legislative aspects of this, most citizens themselves aren't adamant that lists be included in the law. There may be certain areas that are exceptions to this – areas that demand lists be written into law – but the people we spoke to don't see it as essential.

That doesn't mean they don't *like* the idea of lists that are locked in by law. Anything you can do to show you're holding public dollars to stricter standards is looked on favorably. But they understand that a long-term plan means you're going to have to allow a lot of flexibility for the future. **They're far more concerned with the right people deciding where money gets spent than with getting to vote on the use of every dollar.** Because of this, it's our recommendation that from a *public messaging* standpoint, there's no reason to lock yourself into specific project lists when writing legislation.

6. **Show them you've gotten rid of existing waste already.** The steps above will garner support from many, and there are certainly some who aren't going to vote for a tax increase right now, no matter how rational it is. But there's a bloc of voters who don't just need to know about future spending but about the present as well. If you can show them you've cut as much waste out of the current transportation budget as possible, you're likely to sway some voters who are on the fence. It may seem counterintuitive to admit to past wastefulness, but no one really believes you've been running at peak financial efficiency. So you have more to gain from showing you've corrected past mistakes than you lose by admitting them.

*“If you can justify what's going on with the money I already pay,
then I'd be in favor of this.”*

- Orlando Participant

5. Jobs and Economic Development

To be honest, we expected arguments about the employment and economic benefits of new transportation funding to be the most successful, especially in this time of high unemployment and a sagging economy. And it is a crucial argument; but, it is not the MOST important, which is why we've deferred discussing them until now.

The bottom line is that people do understand how much transportation and the economy are linked. And they expect that any new road or highway construction is going to provide jobs. **But they're not ready to support a measure just because it spurs jobs. They believe that any transportation bill needs to stand on its own merits.**

*"A transportation plan needs to stand on its own.
But the economy is a great side effect."
-Charlotte Participant*

We want to be clear here. Talking about new job benefits and economic development is an **essential part of any messaging campaign**. But it cannot be the **primary** message in most campaigns. Unless an area feels they've been especially hard hit by the recession, these benefits must be explained as coming **in addition to** the other benefits the measure will provide.

So we're recommending that in most areas you use economic and employment messages as *supporting* points for a plan that you've already framed using the messages we've outlined above. People will like hearing that the plan to modernize their commutes and set them free is *also* going to bring jobs to the area.

1. **People already know transportation is the heart of the economy.** They respond well to **medical metaphors that explain transportation as vital to economic health**. "Lifblood of the economy." "Economic lifeline." "Our economy's circulatory system." People react well to these because they immediately understand them to be true. They believe that transportation is intimately connected to just about every important aspect of the US economy. They know it provides jobs beyond just construction, and that without the efficient movement of people, goods, and services, our economy will fall behind.

language to USE +

Transportation infrastructure is the lifeblood of the economy. So bolstering our economy means improving transportation. Congestion and deteriorating roads are making it difficult to move freight efficiently and inexpensively. One major business has relocated its regional distribution center from one state to another because deliveries were taking too long. By 2025, the number of vehicle hours trucks spend on the road is expected to increase by over 50%. If we fail to invest adequately in transportation, we're looking at potential economic losses of \$800 million in this state alone.

2. But we're not the developing world – so don't threaten that's where we're headed.

It's not credible to start making threats about America's economy being in danger because Russia and China are building more roads than we are. While people know transportation problems translate into economic problems, they don't believe our transportation system – or economy – is in danger of collapsing. It may be tempting, but you should resist comparing America's transportation investments to that of other countries. And you should definitely avoid threats of falling behind.

"China and Russia and us?

You're comparing apples to oranges, since they are still developing."

"We're not competing over infrastructure.

The question is do we meet our own needs, yes or no."

- D.C. Participants

People understand that we already have more roads than developing countries, so they're going to need more new construction than us. And they don't necessarily think that we're much like more densely populated European first world countries either. They see America's position as both unique and dominant, so they aren't likely to get much out of any comparisons at all.

language to LOSE -

Today, as a percentage of GDP, we invest less than half of what Russia does in their infrastructure, less than one-third of what Western Europe does. Right now, China's building hundreds of thousands of miles of new roads. Over the next 10 years, it plans to build dozens of new airports. Over the next 20, it could build as many as 170 new mass transit systems. Everywhere else, they're thinking big. They're creating jobs today, but they're also playing to win tomorrow. So the bottom line is our shortsightedness has come due. We can no longer afford to sit still.

3. **Economic Impact Analysis is a great way to measure benefits.** Because everyone, Democrats and Republicans, is concerned with wasteful spending, one of the best economic arguments you can make is to translate the number of dollars spent into the dollars projected to be gained from a transportation measure, or even from a specific project. The Kansas Department of Transportation called this economic impact analysis. And people respond to the idea well. They like knowing that you're using the real benefits of a project to help decide whether or not to take it on. It helps to convince them projects aren't merely the result of political handshakes and earmarks.

language to USE +

Too often transportation projects are undertaken for the wrong reasons, and as a result, they end up costing more money than they bring to - or save - their communities. We need to make sure that any projects undertaken with these new funds will contribute to the economies they're going to serve. That's why no project will be undertaken without first performing economic impact analysis, to ensure we get more from the benefits of a project than we put into it in tax dollars. We'll look at how much economic activity a project is going to generate for the businesses that surround it, and if that doesn't outweigh the costs of the project, it simply won't be done.

4. **There are jobs, and then there are jobs.** People understand that not all jobs are created equal. **If you want them to perk up their ears, you need to talk about skilled jobs, sustainable jobs, or family wage jobs.** Just getting some warm bodies up off the unemployment line for the few months it takes complete construction isn't going to impress anyone. They understand that construction jobs can be temporary. So to make jobs a worthwhile message, you need to be able to explain how these jobs will be here for the long term.

don't say -	instead say +
jobs	sustainable jobs, family wage jobs

5. **“Stimulus” is becoming a four-letter word.** The one thing we recommend you avoid doing when it comes to discussing the economy is saying or implying that it is “stimulus.” If you want to attract more than just the liberal voters, you need to understand that stimulus has, for many, become synonymous with wasteful spending.

As a corollary to this, many people associate the “shovel-ready” projects from the first round of stimulus with failed government policy.

you say	they hear
Increasing transportation funding is the strongest stimulus tool available.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More stimulus means more spending for spending sake. That's the last thing we need.
Shovel-ready projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To me, shovel-ready means you'll start tomorrow. You still haven't started all the shovel-ready projects you promised.

language to LOSE -

Increasing transportation funding is the strongest stimulus tool available. Building roads, bridges and public transit is good for the economy because it puts our citizens back to work.

6. Environmental Impact

There are certainly people who care deeply about the environment. And in areas that have a heavy concentration of these people, this message will be more important. But by and large, people don't consider roads and highways *themselves* to be an environmental issue – more so the efficiency of the cars that drive on them. And while more efficient traffic and public transportation can easily be connected to reducing emissions, we found that environmental arguments can sometimes turn as many people off as on.

That doesn't mean you should ignore environmental concerns altogether. It just isn't a leading message, or even a message that needs to be part of the campaign in every area.

1. **Use language that makes the environment a personal issue.** Your strongest tool when discussing environmental concerns is to explain that **more efficient traffic, and more public transportation, cut down on the pollutants and smog that an area experiences.** This is NOT the same as talking about emissions or greenhouse gases. The difference is in how the audience experiences the words. Pollutants affect you personally. They poison the air around the car as you're sitting in traffic. You can smell them. And smog is visible. You can see it hanging like a coffee stain over the skyline.

"I'm not a climate change person, but anyone can see smog and pollutants are bad."

- Charlotte Participant

language to **USE** +

Reducing congestion, and reducing the amount of time you spend idling in traffic or at red lights, means reducing the amount of smog and pollutants in the air. That's important for children and seniors because it will cut rates of asthma and respiratory disease. And it allows you to pollute less without giving up a single thing, and by doing nothing more than getting where you need to be faster.

Emissions, on the other hand, are bad only in the abstract. They harm the Earth, we've been told, but we don't experience them personally. The same is true of greenhouse gases. So even to those who are neutral on the global warming debate, these words don't generate as much urgency.

2. **Some people do care about transportation’s impact on climate change.** There is no doubt that there are regular citizens out there who think about the impact of our transportation system on climate change. They want to hear about things like more public transportation that reduces the overall carbon footprint of a city by taking cars off the road. And while there are a few of them – the kind who join environmental organizations, for instance – who *need* to hear about environmental implications before they’re willing to support it, most people just don’t see the roads and highways primarily as an environmental issue.

3. **But to others “emissions” and “greenhouse gas” are politically loaded words.** For every person we spoke to who wanted to hear about the impact of any proposed measure on global warming, we spoke to someone else who wasn’t sold on the global warming story. Those who don’t buy into climate change are simply opposed to any message that mentions global warming, climate change, emissions, or greenhouse gases at all. These words are all automatic red flags to them to vote against something.

“Relieving congestion isn’t about the environment.”

“Reducing emissions? Sounds expensive.”

- Charlotte Participants

That’s why it’s our recommendation that, unless you’re talking directly to an environmental group, you avoid using any of this language. You’re likely to lose more potential supporters than you might gain with it.

language to LOSE -

There’s no way to talk about climate change without also talking about transportation. But when supporters of the environment and economy square off, they face each other as though they’re in a zero-sum game. They shouldn’t. We can create living wage jobs and reduce greenhouse gases. Combating climate change and funding transportation are not in conflict.

7. Paying for It: Getting to Yes

Once you've made your case using the strategies explained above, and ONLY then, is it possible to talk about how to pay for it.

If you've framed the issues correctly, the only thing left is getting people to take that final step to support the measure – either with their voices or their votes. We understand that there are many ways that the actual funding could be generated – through a gas tax, a sales tax, bond measures, etc. And while the financial details were outside the scope of our research, we did ask people what they would prefer.

Their answers were different in different areas, leading us to make the recommendation that the details of funding are going to have to be tailored on a case-by-case basis. With that said, we can still make some general recommendations.

1. **Explain the cost on a personal scale.** While AASHTO and departments of transportation think of budgets in millions and billions of dollars, such numbers are meaningless to most people. To them, a 20 million dollar shortfall and a billion dollar shortfall sound the same. To get people to understand the cost of a transportation measure, you need to put it in personal terms and measure against their own incomes and budgets.

Tell them what the measure is going to cost them, in dollars, per year, and allow that figure to be the one against which they measure all the benefits you've laid out already.

language to **USE** +

The average person drives 15,000 miles per year or less. If we increase the gas tax by 10 cents per gallon, the average person driving the average car would only pay about \$75 more per year.

2. **However you're going to talk about it, FRAME it as a "usage" tax, in which the people to benefit are the people who will pay for it.** We know that one of the biggest debates in the transportation world right now is the need for more revenue when the fuel tax is both a political third rail and generating dwindling returns. We aren't in a position to weigh in on the best way to pay for transportation needs. But we can make a very specific recommendation about how to **explain** any method you opt for.

Whether people favored a gas or sales tax increase mostly **came down to how much they thought of each as a usage tax.** People think that the cost of transportation should be paid by those who reap the benefits. So you need to explain whatever financial model you choose as doing just that. Some see the gas tax as affecting people who drive the most. But others think this allows those who don't drive but still buy products that must be shipped on our roads to avoid their fair share of the responsibility. So they saw the sales tax as a usage tax as well. **Whichever method you decide to employ, explain it as a tax or fee that is borne proportionate to the extent to which one relies on our transportation system.**

Examples of Framing as a Usage Tax

A **fuel tax** or a miles traveled tax is the fairest way to fund transportation because the people who use the roads most are the people who will pay the most into it when they fill up.

A **sales tax** is the fairest way to fund transportation because all the products you buy wouldn't make it to the store, or your mailboxes, without roads and highways.

With those three things explained, what's most important is to frame the benefits that each audience is most interested in compared to the cost they'd be paying to get them. This will certainly be a job that requires detailed research in any area in which you're proposing a new transportation measure. But to give you a general idea of how this audience-specific framing would work, the following table outlines how to put your final ask to four different audiences.

For audiences who care most about...	Frame the costs this way...
relieving congestion	If I can promise you greater, sustainable mobility – by which I mean synchronized traffic lights, a smarter, more efficient transportation system, and faster clearing of accidents from the roads – would that be worth \$100 a year to you?
government spending	If I can show you that we've cut the waste from our current budget, and commit to you that these new funds will be locally controlled, and that both government and business interests will be at the table, would you be willing to pay \$100 a year for better mobility, more efficient traffic and new economic growth?
transparency	If I can promise you that every dollar collected will be spent only on transportation, and that every project undertaken will be transparent and make all budget and project calendar and contractor information available and easily accessible online, would you be willing to pay \$100 a year for better mobility, more efficient traffic and new economic growth?
the economy	If I can show you that every project undertaken will generate more dollars for the economy than it costs to undertake, and that this transportation measure will create 50,000 sustainable, family-wage jobs right here in your state, would you be willing to pay \$100 a year for greater mobility and more efficient traffic?

Appendix A: Language to Green Light, Language to Red Light



language to green light: words and phrases that will have a positive impact

accountability, responsibility	<p>“...any new transportation initiative must have accountability built into the process...”</p> <p>“...elected officials must take personal ownership and responsibility for...”</p>
choice	<p>“...people need the ability to choose their travel options...”</p>
comprehensive strategy	<p>“... a comprehensive strategy that reaches statewide...”</p>
economy	<p>“...transportation is the lifeblood of the economy...”</p> <p>“...bolstering our economy means improving transportation...”</p> <p>“...adding 50,000 jobs and over \$6 billion to our economy...”</p>
efficient traffic	<p>“...we need traffic that moves more efficiently...”</p>
long-term plan	<p>“... we cannot simply focus on the short-term. We must plan strategically – and optimistically – for the long-term...”</p>
state and local controlled	<p>“...everyone will maintain state and local control of money and project selection...”</p>
sustainable mobility	<p>“...we need a future of sustainable mobility because that’s what it means to be mobile...”</p>



language to red light: words and phrases that make people tune out

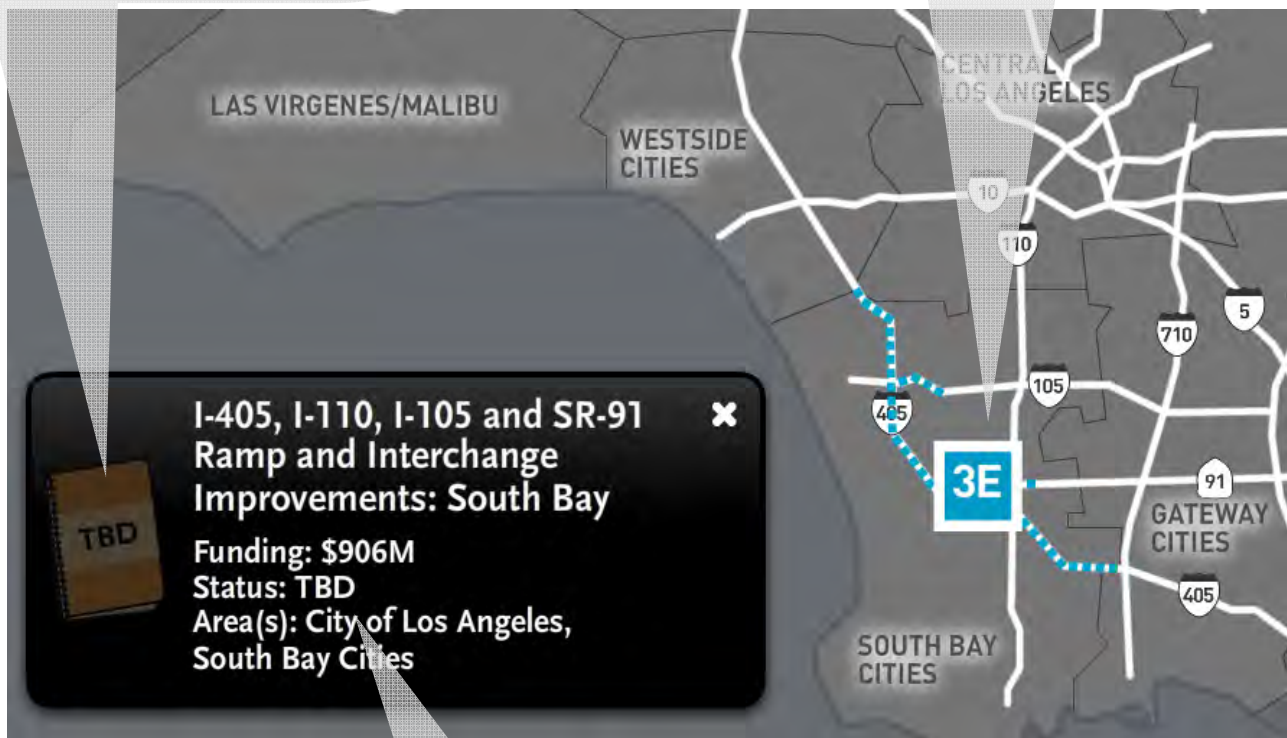
maintenance, fixing	“...for the on-going maintenance and improvements that are necessary...” “...maintenance and expansion will...”
public spending, spending money	“The most important part of public spending is...”
Washington	“...relying on the federal government and Washington...” “...and we are going to work with Congress to...”

Appendix B: Building an Interactive Map

The following screenshot was taken from LA County Metro's online interactive map that allows residents to find details about projects in their areas that are funded by Measure R.

The Plan: they want to be able to click here and get more details, like lists of contractors hired.

Route info: being able to click around a map helps them visualize where projects are planned in relation to them.



Budget and timing: they want to know what it's costing, and exactly when construction will begin and end. TBD is not acceptable.

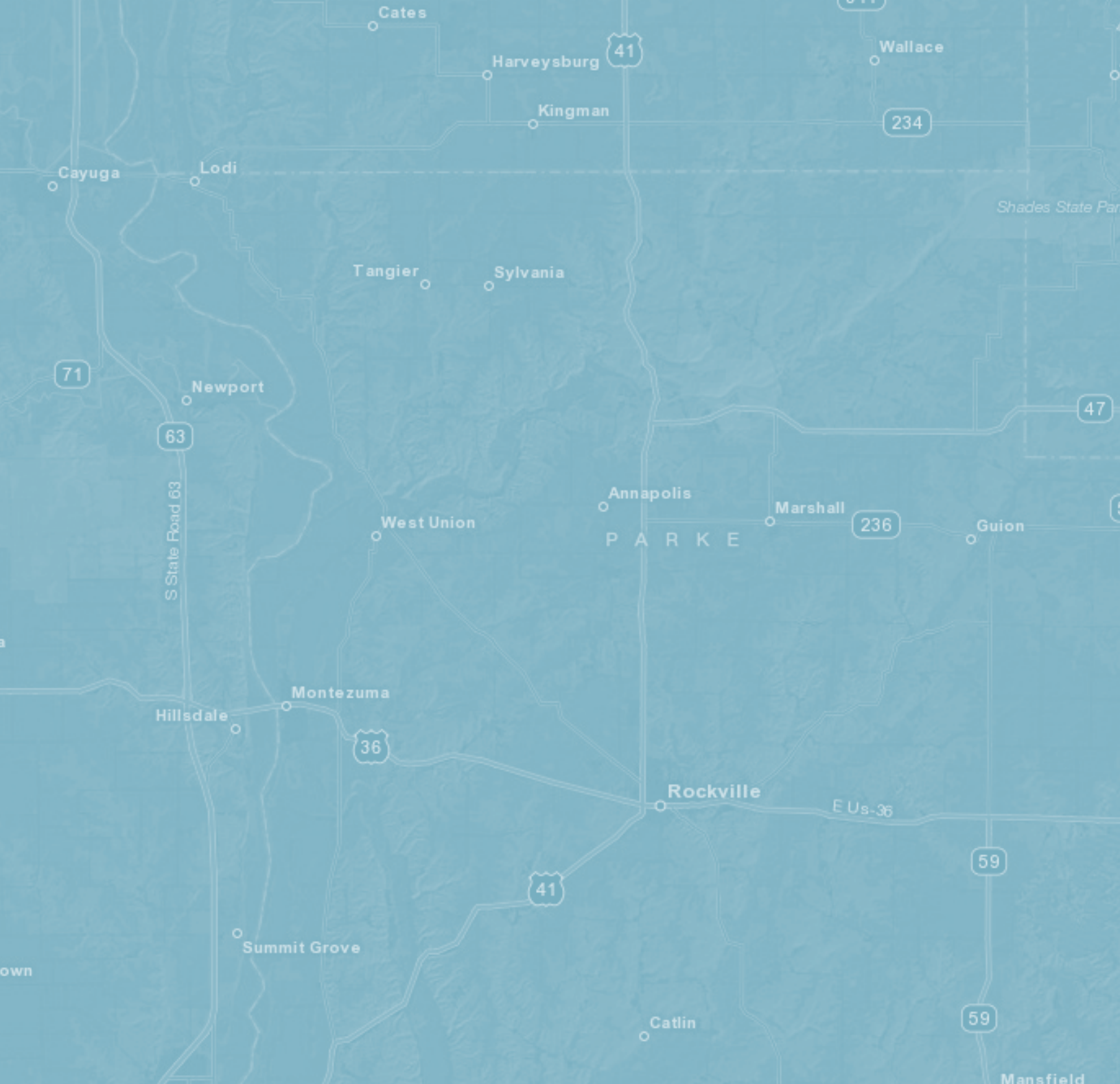
Appendix C: Methodology

We conducted three two-hour Listening Sessions with 9–11 “opinion influencers” in Denver, CO, Charlotte, NC, and Orlando, FL in mid-September and early October 2010. We asked them about a variety of issues relating to highways and transportation. We also convened 25 residents of the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area – some of whom were opinion influencers and some of whom had working knowledge of transportation and infrastructure issues – in our Alexandria, VA facility on October 18, 2010 to find out what they thought about a federal effort to increase transportation funding.

We conducted traditional focus groups in Denver, Charlotte, and Orlando. In Washington, D.C., we used Instant Response Dial technology to test a variety of messages, advertisements, and political speeches relating to transportation, infrastructure, and driving. Instant Response combines the most important components of quantitative, qualitative, and in-depth public opinion research to test delivery, understanding, believability, and impact. It displays second-to-second, word-by-word measurement of participant reaction to any verbal communication in real-time.

All of the participants fit the following criteria:

- Age 23–65
- College educated or better
- Above average income
- Currently own a car and drive at least 10,000 miles per year
- Are considered “influencers” because they are more likely to express their opinions to those around them and “speak up” regularly, either in conversation or online
- Watch the news on TV, listen to the news on radio, read a daily newspaper, or read news online at least 5 days a week



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