

Racial Equity in Infrastructure, a U.S. Goal, Is Left to States

The decision about how to spend the money falls largely to state governments, raising questions about whether the package can live up to its ambition.

By Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Madeleine Ngo

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WASHINGTON — President Biden’s [\\$1 trillion plan](#) to rebuild America’s infrastructure comes with a built-in promise: No longer will roads, bridges and railways be instruments of bias or racism. Communities that ended up divided along racial lines will be made whole.

But the decision about how to spend the money falls largely to the states, not all of which are likely to put as high a priority on that promise as Mr. Biden does, raising questions about whether the legislation will deliver on his goal.

“It’s hard to have a national approach when the decisions are made state by state,” said Beth Osborne, who was an acting assistant secretary in the Transportation Department during the Obama administration. “A fundamental part of this program has always been to have the feds raise money, hand it over to the states and cross our fingers.”

The administration has said it aims to repair the damage from the United States’ history of racial disparities in how the government builds, repairs and locates physical infrastructure. In the [1950s and 1960s](#), highway projects often targeted Black neighborhoods, destroying cultural and economic centers and bringing decades of environmental harm. State and local officials often steered roads [through Black communities, isolating them from parks or economic gain](#).

The task is complicated by a tangle of competing priorities. Some state and local governments might not share the Biden administration’s vision for racial equity; others might be aligned with the president politically, but would choose to spend the money differently. And the sheer size of the bill — it is the [largest infusion of federal investment into infrastructure projects](#) in more than a decade, touching nearly every facet of the American economy — makes it difficult to track every penny.

About \$660 billion will be provided to the Transportation Department, the bulk of which will be directly distributed to states, who will have broad latitude in how to spend it. The package also includes about \$211 billion in “discretionary grants” that require approval from the department.

Dorothy Wiley, whose Louisiana home sits in the path of a proposed highway expansion, said that while she was encouraged by the president’s pledges for racial equity, she was worried the federal government has limited say over the spending.

The plan to expand Interstate 49, which has been delayed for years and is undergoing an environmental analysis, would cut through Shreveport's community of Allendale, which neighbors the district once home to the blues singer Huddie William Ledbetter, better known as "Lead Belly."

While business leaders in the community say the highway would connect the town to economic hubs in Louisiana, Ms. Wiley worries it will displace her church and neighbors.

"Looking at where I live right now, it's like they want to push us out farther and, well, it will gentrify the community," said Ms. Wiley, the president of an organization opposing the development. "My hope is that it won't be the same but I feel like it will."

Shawn Wilson, the secretary of Louisiana's Department of Transportation, said he was weighing the concerns of Ms. Wiley, as well as the views of members of the business community who say the project would connect Allendale to other cities in Louisiana and nearby states, generating millions in economic value for the communities.

Mr. Wilson, who was recently elected the president of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, a nonprofit representing state transportation departments, has yet to reach a decision on how the state should proceed.

But he said the federal government had informed him that Louisiana's chances of getting money from the discretionary fund would depend on whether the state's projects factor in racial equity and climate change. That discretionary money, he said, would be necessary to complete any expansion.

Mr. Wilson said the views of the local community would be paramount.

"We're going to ask them to live with this infrastructure. We're going to ask them to invest local dollars in this infrastructure," he said. "And if we don't do it right, they're going to have to deal with the consequences of this infrastructure."

Federal officials say there are provisions in place to encourage states to take equity into account. Transportation Department officials have been working with the Domestic Policy Council, headed by Susan Rice, who leads the president's racial equity initiative, to reach out to local governments to implement the infrastructure package.

Christopher Coes, principal deputy assistant secretary for transportation policy, said projects that prioritize racial equity would be more likely to receive funding from the discretionary grants. He added that the administration would "use every tool in our arsenal, both hard and soft" to ensure that outcome.

The administration also notes that it already has made an effort to use new criteria in approving grants. In June, the Transportation Department awarded \$905 million for two dozen state projects and [considered climate change, environmental justice and racial equity](#) in its criteria for the first time.

Mr. Coes also said the administration has already taken aggressive measures, including in March when the Transportation Department took the rare step of invoking the Civil Rights Act to pause a massive highway project in Houston.

In a letter to the state, federal officials asked Texas to halt the project, which would expand Interstate 45, while they investigated the civil rights and environmental concerns raised by Representative Sheila Jackson Lee of Texas and local groups.

The highway plan would displace more than 1,000 homes, 344 businesses, five places of worship and two schools, according to an [environmental impact report](#) from the Texas Department of Transportation. Local [activists](#) who oppose the plan said the expansion would disproportionately affect low-income residents and tear through Black and Latino communities.

Sean Jefferson, who lives in Houston's Fifth Ward, one of the city's historic Black neighborhoods, said he was informed by state officials that his home of nine years would be demolished under the plan. Although he said that he would receive financial compensation, he would not be able to afford a new place in the same neighborhood. For now, Mr. Jefferson is staying in his house, "praying and hoping" that federal officials permanently stop the project.

Texas officials said such expansions were crucial for strengthening economic opportunity, particularly with a growing population.

"It will bring much-needed and significant improvements to I-45 to enhance safety and mobility as our state continues to see robust population growth and freight traffic," said Bob Kaufman, a spokesman for the Texas Department of Transportation.

But Mr. Jefferson said he feared that the highway project would continue to displace members of the community; many of his neighbors already had been forced to move because of rising prices and the development of townhouses over recent years.

"I'm just scared about what's going to happen," he said. "We've been staying with each other for a long time. This is the place that we call home."

Laura Perrotta, the president and chief executive of the American Highway Users Alliance, a lobbying group that represents automotive companies and roadway users, said that states should have broad control over how the federal funds are spent.

Adding capacity on highways could be beneficial for local economies, she said, especially as some states experience population growth. Reducing congestion and widening lanes could also improve safety for drivers, Ms. Perrotta said.

"I don't think you can just lock down and say we're not going to expand anywhere because of the ramifications," Ms. Perrotta said. "I think you just need to have a balance."

At a White House briefing last week, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said the country had a duty to reckon with past decisions that may have harmed communities of color.

He pointed to a provision in the infrastructure bill that would “reconnect” communities of color to economic opportunity by making it easier to access jobs. That program, which Mr. Coes said could take the form of developing new public transportation systems, bicycle lanes or even dismantling highways, was shaved down to \$1 billion from the \$20 billion originally proposed, although there is additional funding that is still pending in a domestic policy bill that Democrats hope to pass soon.

Transportation experts have argued another solution is to focus infrastructure spending on addressing a growing backlog of projects in need of repair rather than expanding freeways that historically separated Black and white neighborhoods. While a portion of the funds issued directly to states must address safety and repairs, experts say it is just a fraction of what is needed to address what the American Society of Civil Engineers estimates to be a \$786 billion backlog for road and bridge repairs.

Representative Peter A. DeFazio of Oregon, a Democrat and the chairman of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, originally pushed to include language in the bill that would make it more challenging for states to use the federal funds on highway expansion. Although he said he would have preferred a “hard and fast requirement” to prioritize road repair, states would have to answer to the public if their projects did not promote equity or reduce pollution.

“I think they might be held accountable by their own citizens,” Mr. DeFazio said.