

## Changing times

More infrastructure talk this month, plus vehicle travel has reached pre-pandemic levels

Tim Bruns / May 28, 2021



**Times are changing. Nothing signifies this more than a recent study from TRIP, the national transportation research nonprofit, which shows [vehicle travel in the U.S. has returned to near pre-pandemic levels](#) and has surpassed pre-COVID levels in 15 states.**

Despite these statistics signaling a “return to normalcy,” the report also notes that many employers support a significant share of work post-pandemic continuing from home, which TRIP says will impact travel trends and migration trends in the long-term. In 2018, 5% of U.S. workers were working from home. By September 2020, workers in 58% of U.S. households that had at least one employed member reported that they had substituted some or all of their in-person work for telework. That number increased to 62% in March 2021.

The increase in vaccinations and subsequent lifting of some restrictions on masking and in-person gathering across the country could explain why we are currently seeing a spike in vehicle miles traveled. According to NPR, over [132 million people or 40% of the total U.S. population has been fully vaccinated](#).

I have to admit that for myself, there was definitely a sense of relief after receiving my second vaccination. While I think it may be a while until I am ready to participate in large, crowded events, I am excited for the chance

to spend time with vaccinated friends and family members without worrying about constantly masking.

In other news, last week the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) submitted testimony to the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure to advocate for the [establishment of a passenger rail trust fund](#) to provide long-term certainty necessary for planning and funding multi-year projects and state-of-good-repair investments. APTA President & CEO Paul P. Skoutelas told Congress: “Passenger rail is an underutilized mode, and ripe to connect with national and local transportation networks and rural areas with high-performance corridor services. These services will relieve congestion on highways and airspace and provide efficient, accessible, equitable, and environmental-friendly mobility options.”

This week, APTA also [expressed concern regarding the Republican Roadmap framework for U.S. infrastructure](#). The plan proposes to cut current public transit investment by more than \$15 billion over an eight-year period. APTA raised objections, saying the government should be making a robust investment in the nation’s public transportation systems.

With all the talk of infrastructure and negotiations ongoing on an infrastructure package, several pieces of surface transportation legislation have been introduced in Congress this month. The [High Risk Rural Roads Safety Act of 2021](#) would increase funding for the Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP) and create a \$750 million HSIP set-aside directed solely for safety projects on high-risk rural roads, with \$150 million of that directed to tribal lands. The [Connecting Opportunities through Mobility Metrics and Unlocking Transportation Efficiencies \(COMMUTE\) Act](#) provides data to states and local governments to measure accessibility to local businesses and important destinations, and inform investments in transportation systems. And finally, the [Clean Transit for America plan](#) aims to provide \$73 billion to

move the country’s public transit systems to zero-emission fleets.

This month, our [Traffic & Transit](#) coverage features stories on light rail transit and various forms of traffic safety technology.

The first is my story covering the Mid-Coast Trolley Project, led by the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG). The project is an 11-mile extension of University of California (UC) San Diego Trolley service from the Santa Fe Depot in Downtown San Diego north to the University community. This trolley system is supported by a vast network of rail bridges and provides high-capacity transit service for the area. Read more in the feature [“Rail Transit on the Coast”](#) and be sure to [check out my video interview](#) with SANDAG’s Director of Engineering & Construction John Haggerty.

For our second feature, Amine Haoui, Ph.D., the co-founder of Sensys Networks, looks at some of the more recent technology developments aiming to improve safety for vulnerable road users. This includes smartphone apps that allow pedestrians and cyclists to be detected and interact with traffic signal controllers. It also includes infrastructure-to-vehicle (I2V) communications as well as developments in artificial intelligence, and particularly deep learning. Read more in the feature [“Technology Trends to Increase Pedestrian and Cyclist Safety.”](#)

Finally, Jim Grass with the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) shares how the department is implementing intersection conflict warning systems (ICWS) across the state. These systems are improving traffic safety across Indiana by reducing the likelihood of severe vehicle crashes at some non-signalized, two-way stop-sign controlled intersections. INDOT has installed 17 of the systems at highway intersections since summer 2020. Read more in the feature [“Improving Safety with Intersection Conflict Warning Systems.”](#)

We hope you enjoy this month’s coverage! As always—stay well, stay safe, and thanks for reading!