

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105575](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal funding helped build a national network of highways, producing economic and mobility benefits. But some of these highways divided neighborhoods. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act enacted in 2021 required DOT to establish the Reconnecting Communities Pilot program to “restore community connectivity” through activities such as highway removal or capping.

The act and House Report 117-99 included provisions for GAO to review aspects of federally funded highway removal and capping projects. This report addresses: (1) highway removal and capping projects that received federal funds from 2012 through 2021; (2) key considerations for effective planning of selected projects; and (3) how the Reconnecting Communities Pilot program aligns with leading practices.

GAO reviewed relevant statutes and regulations and DOT data on federal highway funding, and interviewed state and local stakeholders for eight projects selected for a range of goals. GAO also reviewed DOT pilot program documents and compared them with leading practices for pilot program design that GAO previously identified.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations to DOT on the Reconnecting Communities Pilot program: (1) establish performance measures for objectives, (2) assess data and evaluate pilot program results, and (3) identify a means to make scalability decisions. DOT concurred with GAO’s recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105575](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth Repko at (202) 512-2384 or repkoe@gao.gov.

May 2023

HIGHWAY INFRASTRUCTURE

Better Alignment with Leading Practices Would Improve DOT’s Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program

What GAO Found

In recent years, some localities have removed highways or built structures known as “highway caps” over sections of highways to repurpose the land for community or economic development. GAO identified 21 projects to remove or cap highways that received federal funding from fiscal years 2012 through 2021, the most current data available at the time of our review. Because there is no statutory or regulatory definition of a highway removal or highway cap, these projects can take many forms. For example, a highway removal project could downsize a highway to a boulevard or remove and rebuild a highway in another location. Officials from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) told GAO that, consistent with statute, these projects must have a transportation nexus to be eligible to use federal-aid highway formula grants. Further, officials said that FHWA makes eligibility decisions on a case-by-case basis according to project circumstances. These projects may also be eligible for certain DOT discretionary grants.

Through a review of eight selected highway removal and capping projects, GAO identified five key considerations to inform project sponsors’ effective planning of such projects: (1) establishing goals that reflect community and transportation objectives, (2) analyzing potential project effects to weigh alternatives, (3) planning for the equitable use of project land, (4) conceptualizing removal and capping projects to engage stakeholders and address concerns, and (5) developing measures to assess community goals and other project outcomes.

While the Department of Transportation (DOT) made substantial progress implementing the first of five funding rounds of the Reconnecting Communities Pilot program, GAO found that the program does not fully align with GAO’s leading practices for effective pilot program design. According to DOT officials, they faced time constraints in setting up the program and awarding initial funding, which hindered DOT’s ability to fully meet all leading practices by the first round. In February 2023, DOT announced 45 projects would receive \$185 million in first year awards. By taking steps now to fully align with these leading practices, DOT will be better positioned to improve future funding rounds and assess whether the pilot program is meeting its objective of reconnecting communities.

Alignment of Department of Transportation’s (DOT) Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program with GAO’s Leading Practices for Pilot Program Design

Leading practice	Description of leading practice	Alignment
Stakeholder communication	Appropriate two-way stakeholder communication and input should occur at all stages of the pilot.	● Aligns
Measurable objectives	Establish well-defined, appropriate, clear, and measurable objectives.	◐ Partially aligns
Assessment methodology	Articulate a data gathering and assessment methodology that details the type and source of the information necessary to evaluate the pilot and methods for collecting that information, including timing and frequency.	◐ Partially aligns
Evaluation plan	Develop a plan that defines how the information collected will be analyzed to evaluate the pilot’s implementation and performance.	◐ Partially aligns
Scalability criteria	Identify criteria for identifying lessons from the pilot to inform decisions on whether and how to integrate pilot activities into overall efforts.	○ Does not align

Source: GAO analysis of DOT information. | [GAO-23-105575](#)