



Smart Growth America  
Making Neighborhoods Great Together

# Transit Campaign Planning

A strategy template for organizers



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## Transit Campaign Planning: A strategy template for organizers

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This report is a product of [Smart Growth America](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org), the only national organization dedicated to researching, advocating for and leading coalitions to bring smart growth practices to more communities nationwide. From providing more sidewalks to ensuring more homes are built near public transportation or that productive farms remain a part of our communities, smart growth helps make sure people across the nation can live in great neighborhoods. For additional information visit [www.smartgrowthamerica.org](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org).

*Cover photo of Chicago's "Don't X Out Transit" campaign by Transportation for America.*

# Introduction

Congratulations! Your organization or coalition is interested in winning a dedicated funding source for transit infrastructure and transit oriented development in your community. Transit provides a great many benefits but is often the first to lose funding in tough fiscal times. Establishing local and state based funding streams is more important now than ever. Hundreds of communities have secured mechanisms dedicated to transit through the leadership of elected leaders and also by going directly to the voters. While this is no small task, designing a comprehensive, hard-hitting campaign plan will position your organization for success.

Use this strategy template to create your own campaign plan. The components discussed here are some of the most important decisions to make before launching a transit campaign:

1. Situation analysis, including external and internal factors to consider;
2. *Specific and measurable* goals and objectives;
3. Target decision-makers;
4. Strategies that define the campaign's primary approaches;
5. Tactics, activities and implementation timeline;
6. Structure and operations of the campaign to ensure high-impact implementation;
7. Budget.

This template may be used to generate an original campaign plan by responding to the questions and suggestions in each section. To build a strong plan, you will need to conduct research, identify partners, assess resources, and hold several strategic planning retreats with partner groups that may include stakeholders from business, equity, transportation and environmental interests. The process can take several months and you should be expanding your coalition and supporters as you develop the plan. Once your campaign plan is drafted, you and your colleagues will be able to launch your campaign with a solid foundation. Note, campaign plans are meant to be confidential and should not be circulated beyond the campaign team and trusted partners.

## 1. Situation analysis

Begin by briefly describing the policy issue or issues on which the campaign will focus. What is the problem you want to solve: bridge transit operations gaps, fund a capital program, enhance transit and land use connections, etc. Include critical context and background information surrounding the issues. Articulate why new solutions are needed or why current policies need to change. Address how long the campaign would take (a few months, a few years, etc) and what governmental processes you will need to influence. This step should analyze both the external environment, as well as, the internal (organizational) environment. Key topics to cover in the situation analysis are listed below. This analysis will be a valuable resource that will help you as you work through the next set of major decisions to build your campaign plan.

### **External environment**

What is currently going on in local politics, relevant state or national politics, the economy, the environment or other contexts that will impact your campaign? What opportunities and challenges

do these external forces present? Some factors to consider:

- Economic climate in your community (somewhat stable, extreme deficits, high or moderate unemployment?)
- Political context for transit issues (how is transit framed in news stories; how are service cuts being discussed; are there any current or recent transit agency scandals to consider?)
- Public awareness and opinion (Is there any public opinion data to suggest the level of voter support for transit funding? What do you need to learn about public opinion?)
- Champions and critics of transit (What do the governor, state legislators, municipal leaders, DOT officials and other public leaders think about transit?)
- Key opinion leaders and their potential to be mobilized (editorial boards, local officials, business and community leaders, experts, etc.)
- Opponents (What organizations and leaders might vigorously oppose a transit funding proposal?)
- Recent efforts (Have there been related administrative or legislative efforts in recent history? What were the outcomes and lessons?)

### **Internal environment**

What resources does your campaign have at its disposal? The internal factors that should be noted here include, but are not limited to:

- Staff and expertise on relevant issues from coalition groups (be specific and realistic about the amount of time in each staff person will be able to dedicate to the campaign)
- Grassroots organizing and mobilizing capacity (including online)
- Immediate prospects for additional funding
- Midterm and long term fundraising prospects
- Direct access to and influence with key decision makers
- Direct access to those with important relationships with key decision makers.
- Connections with diverse stakeholder groups (business, equity, housing, environment, etc)

## **2. Goals and objectives**

### **Primary goal: Finding a funding source**

A transit funding campaign aims to create a specific, substantive, and dedicated funding source. Ideally, the funding should go beyond simply supporting a single, short-term project. The stated goal of the campaign must be clear regarding the intended funding source(s), the structure of the

mechanism, and related rules. For example, will it be a fee, tax or something else? What will the rate be? Is there a sunset provision (expiration) on the policy?

The structure of the funding stream should be designed to meet a specified annual funding amount. That amount should be adequate enough to make a difference in supporting transit but it should be a realistic and winnable goal, as well. Determining the right policy goal will require substantive research and the assistance of experts. Next a *strategic vehicle* must be determined. This could be a bill, a referendum or ballot initiative, an executive order, or a budget resolution, for example. Once the policy goal and strategic vehicle are set, the decision maker(s) who can enact the proposal can be identified.

The campaign plan should be designed entirely to achieve this primary goal. The campaign should move forward with discipline while always keeping the primary goal, strategic vehicle, and target decision makers in mind at all times.

### **Transit Funding Mechanisms**

Funding streams can come from a myriad of sources. Some common mechanisms have included sales taxes, gas taxes, parking fees, vehicle ownership fees and real estate value capture, to name just a few. You can read much more about funding sources in Smart Growth America's companion resource, Transit Funding Mechanisms: A Primer. Download a copy at [www.smartgrowthamerica.org/documents/transit-funding-mechanisms.pdf](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/documents/transit-funding-mechanisms.pdf).

### **Secondary goals**

Usually, transit campaigns are substantial, multi-year efforts, so it is sensible to identify smaller, intermediate wins along the way. These "secondary goals" can be smaller policy goals or organizational goals. For example, you may want to increase your group's list of supporters by a specified percentage. Or, you might want to cultivate new pro-transit allies and spokespeople. The number of secondary goals should be limited to three to five and identified as either short-term, intermediate-term, or long-term. The secondary goals should not detract from the primary policy goal but rather reinforce it.

### **Specify and prioritize your objectives**

It is important to include a section in your campaign plan that describes each of your objectives. These are the goals broken down into very specific pieces. Do more than just list these as bulleted items: this section should start to tell the story of your campaign's victory. Building on the external and internal situation analysis, include each objective's relative feasibility or win-ability. Some of the policy objectives in a multiple-objective platform may be more difficult to win than others and require specialized strategies.

This full list of objectives needs to be prioritized clearly, i.e., what are you willing to drop if resources aren't available? A clear, honest priority setting process will help coalition partners and funders (and other potential audiences) better understand how resources are going to be allocated among sub-issues.

### 3. Targets

Understanding which decision maker is authorized to enact the transit funding proposal is critical in constructing a winning transit campaign plan. There is always a specific person or group of people who make the decision to approve or reject the proposal, and these are the primary targets of the campaign. If the strategic vehicle is an administrative policy change, the decision maker may be the governor, mayor, agency head, the members of a commission, or perhaps MPO leaders depending on the jurisdiction. If it is a bill, the targets are members of a legislative body. And, it is not all members of the body, but the specifically the swing voters. Those who are secure supporters and those who are absolutely “ungettable” are not the focus. The campaign must be designed to go after the swing votes and bring them to yes. The names of the primary targets should be specified in the campaign plan.

If the strategic vehicle is a ballot measure the voting public is the primary target. *The public* is obviously too large a group to focus on, so a key subgroup must be strategically selected. Perhaps it is suburban commuters, urban transit riders, students, or some other group. The subgroup should be selected based on the best chance of maximizing “yes” votes on Election Day. It is advisable to enlist the help of professional campaign strategists to select the best subgroup to target. The campaign will be designed to turn out members of this group to the polls.

#### **Secondary audiences**

Sometimes it is very difficult to convince or even just access the primary target. In such instances, the campaign can identify *secondary targets* who can influence the primary decision makers. These are the people and organizations who can help sway the main deciders. They could be other political leaders, organizations with special clout such as a chamber of commerce or a citizen group, an advisor, staff or even a neighbor of the primary target. Not everyone who has influence should be listed here, but identifying five to eight strong secondary targets will help you channel the campaign resources in the right direction.

#### **Public audience**

In any grassroots campaign, it is critical to identify the *main* public audience. In a ballot campaign, the public is obviously a critical component as discussed earlier. Even in other types of campaigns, it is important to have a public audience in mind. Include a section in your campaign plan that prioritizes which audiences your campaign will engage to be successful. Be as specific as possible here: narrowing your focus by age, gender, personal or political interests, geographic location or other defining factors will make your outreach more successful. Prioritizing the key public audiences will help inform the communications and messaging strategy of the campaign.

### 4. Strategies

Now that you have identified your target audiences, how will you reach them? Start with your primary target audience, and lay out a plan for gaining their support for your issue. Again, enlisting the help of seasoned campaigners in making these decisions can make all the difference. What will be the “slogan” or main theme of the campaign? The slogan “*Transit: Some of us ride it. All of us need it*” is a different strategic approach than “*Transit: How a great city moves.*” A campaign might employ a comprehensive speaker’s bureau to reach small community groups, flyer at transit stations, hold issue forums, etc. The strategy of the campaign should be based on the primary goal and target decision makers, as well as the resources and connections of the campaign effort.

### **Messaging**

Reaching your target audience is more than just a matter of talking to them: it's a matter of what message you deliver, too. The Smart Chart, an interactive online tool from Spitfire Strategies, can help you make and assess strategic communications decisions. Learn more about the tool at <http://smartchart.org>.

## **5. Tactics, activities and timeline**

Next, outline the major tactics you will use to put your strategies into action, and the activities each tactic will require. This outline should not include all details, but rather the framework of anticipated activity over the length of the campaign. Include steps you will employ to influence both the primary and secondary targets. For instance, if your strategy to win a legislative fight includes influencing swing legislators, a tactic might be to get voters to communicate directly with swing legislators during specific intervals. An activity might be to organize a calling event or send email action alerts.

Define your tactics and activities in terms of each of the core strategies and goals they will serve. In other words, list and describe each of the tactics you will use to achieve the stated primary and secondary goals. This will improve the capacity to evaluate the performance of the campaign. For example, press 'hits' from the release of a report will be judged not simply on the basis of the numbers media mentions, but primarily on how they move closer to the goals.

It's also helpful to identify and describe each of your tactics and activities in terms of campaign components like *coalition building*, *communications*, and *grassroots organizing*. The advantage in adding this format is that you will be able to easily identify these components as a group.

Finally, organize the tactics and activities into a timeline and assign staff and organization responsibilities to all the deliverables. The timeline will be dynamic and does not need to include all the details, but it should define the framework of the campaign and identify the main milestones and dates, such as legislative deadlines and government report releases, etc.

## **6. Structure and operations**

Include a section in your campaign plan that addresses how your campaign operation will be structured. These factors include, but are not limited to:

- Staff roles and responsibilities (campaign director, communication manager, volunteer coordinator, fundraiser, etc.)
- Roles of coalition partners and advisory board
- Clear lines of authority and decision making roles
- Internal communications process
- Relationships and expectations among campaign partners and coalition groups
- Evaluation process for assessing campaign progress and performance

## 7. Budget and funding needs

Having developed the main elements of the campaign, this section lays out the budget broken out by each year of the campaign, including in-kind resources.

Be as comprehensive as you can and break out expenditures into discrete categories such as:

- Staffing;
- Consultants;
- Polling, focus groups;
- Media buys (paid advertisements on TV, radio, websites, newspapers and magazines);
- Office overhead (rent, utilities, phone, internet, basic office supplies and computers);
- Legal counsel (on retainer);
- Printing (direct mail, signs and leaflets);
- Travel.

There may be an understandable tendency to minimize real resource gaps for fear of creating an impression that the campaign does not have the horsepower needed for a winning effort. A refusal to document real resource gaps and funding needs could well give potential funders an impression that you don't understand the demands of successful campaigning or ultimately lead to an understaffed, under-funded and ultimately unsuccessful campaign.

## Conclusion

Creating a campaign plan will help your transit advocacy be more focused, more strategic and ultimately more successful. Be sure to refer to your plan throughout the course of the campaign, and use it to guide your strategic decisions. For additional resources on running successful ballot campaigns, visit the Center for Transportation Excellence at [www.cfte.org](http://www.cfte.org). Good luck!

## Read more online

Find all the materials referenced here as well as models of past transit campaigns at [www.smartgrowthamerica.org](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org).