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Dear Trail Advocate,

Our nation's current federal transportation bill—passed by the U.S. Congress in late June of this year—took a huge step backward for trails, walking and bicycling. Among other setbacks, the bill, Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21), reduced funding levels, increased competition and provided more opportunities for states to transfer funds away from trail programs.

Among the many challenges our movement faces under the new law is the opportunity for governors to opt out of the Recreational Trails Program (RTP) by notifying the Federal Highway Administration of their decision to do so. This year, the deadline was September 1. As the first test of our strength under the new law, the number of states to opt out of RTP would set the stage for our movement for years to come, with direct and serious implications on subsequent trail and active transportation funding decisions.

The RTP is a small but highly successful and popular federal program. Funded by gas taxes paid by off-road vehicles, program resources fund development and maintenance of trails for all users. RTP funds leverage several times the initial federal investment in local, state and private resources, prompting not just safe and healthy access to the outdoors but highly needed economic and tourist activity.

Long before the Sept. 1 deadline, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) was working with partners and allies—both from within the Coalition for Recreational Trails (CRT) and others—to execute a strategy to minimize the number of states opting out of RTP. We really didn't know what to expect in light of the new law, but we knew we would come together as a force and set the stage for strong outcomes.

The groundswell of support for RTP was tremendous! More than 10,000 RTC supporters, joined by countless others spurred on by partners organizations, asked their governors not to opt out of RTP. Behind the scenes, we held meetings, made countless phone calls and touted the program's benefits to state officials. I'm especially proud of RTC's work to craft and customize winning strategies for every state.

The results exceeded anything we could have anticipated. **Of all 50 states and the District of Columbia, only two states opted out of the program!**



And even in those two states, we have not given up hope. In Florida, our staff has negotiated with top officials to minimize the impact of this decision, securing commitments to fully fund recreational trails from other programs. And Kansas was in truth quite a surprise, after we had received tentative confirmation the state would not opt out. We will continue working with state officials there to improve future outcomes.

Perhaps of even greater import is the knowledge we have gleaned from the process. In an overwhelming majority of the states, rather than the decision not to opt out of RTP being a foregone conclusion, officials held intense conversations regarding whether to opt out. In other words, the voice of advocates all around the country played a monumental and decisive role in this victory.

This effort was just the beginning of the challenges we face in MAP-21, as we work to maximize the benefits of active transportation for everyone. We will undoubtedly be turning to you again as we tackle the twists and turns of a complicated bill that threatens to renege on previous policies aiming to establish walking and biking as valid modes of transportation, and trails as an essential part of the underlying infrastructure.

Working with partners and coalitions of all stripes, RTC will not rest in the struggle to ensure that investments in trail, walking and bicycling will continue to grow and be prioritized. But for the sake of the movement and posterity, we must occasionally pause and celebrate our victories. Now is such a time.

The entire trail, walking and bicycling movement owes a huge debt of gratitude to everyone involved in preserving the RTP in this recent effort.

With thanks,

Keith Laughlin
President
Rails-to-Trails Conservancy