About High Road Strategy Center

High Road Strategy Center is a nonprofit think-and-do tank, based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, that promotes “high road” solutions to social problems. These treat shared growth and opportunity, environmental sustainability, and resilient democratic institutions as necessary and achievable complements in human development. Through our various projects, we work with cities around the country to promote innovation and the implementation of high road policy. High Road Strategy Center is nonpartisan but values-based. We seek a world of equal opportunity and security for all.

University of Wisconsin — Madison
608.263.3889 | info@highroad.wisc.edu
HIGHROAD.WISC.EDU
A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear friend,

As we reflect on the past year, we're grateful to report growth in program range, depth and impact—helped along by a national administration much more supportive of high-road development than those of the past.

Among many new initiatives in 2023, we launched the Government Performance Action and Learning (GPAL), a partnership with Polco and others. GPAL aims to give local decision makers easy access to a huge number of indicators and local government performance, over time and compared to other communities. It provides latitude and longitude in making development choices for their communities, and verifiable evidence of the wisdom of taking a high road path. Working with AARP Livable Communities and Smart Growth America, our Mayors Innovation Project (MIP) also began the Mayors Institute on Pedestrian Safety, which we expect will be continuing service of peer support and technical service for mayors leading in this increasingly contentious area. As you'll see in the annual review below, longer standing program efforts—on MIP again, State Smart Transportation Initiative (SSTI), ProGov21, and Work and Opportunity—have also been very active.

By the end of 2023, and beginning publicly at the start of 2024, we also changed our name from COWS to High Road Strategy Center. “COWS” was originally an acronym for Center on Wisconsin Strategy. The acronym was easily pronounced, and its ordinary reference—to a herbaceous ruminant more numerous here in Wisconsin than humans—reassuringly familiar. But as an ever-greater share of our work went on outside Wisconsin, the center’s name was increasingly inaccurate and thus confusing; our home state name had to go. Still fond of the acronym, but unable to find a suitable alternative word beginning with “w”—we dropped the original name but kept the old acronym as our name. But while “COWS” is easy to pronounce and the center named such has done decades of good work that we’re proud of, this name obviously does not directly describe our work, which has always been and will remain to research, experiment, improve and extend the practice of high-road development: using better democratic practice, inside and outside government, to increase productivity in environmentally sustainable ways and ensure fairness and inclusion in its opportunity and benefits. “High Road Strategy Center” better describes that work. We hope you agree. As we move forward, we remain committed to our goal of getting this whole world on the high road, beginning with every community in this country. We still believe that for the U.S. to better become a society fit to live in, and human civilization something worth preserving, we must learn to live better with each other and the rest of nature while increasing human flourishing. Taking the high road in our development enables us to do that. We're delighted the present administration in Washington appears, at least sometimes, to recognize this imperative. But we know there is a nearly fantastic amount of work to be done to implement it.

Thanks again to all who have helped in this work so far and going forward.

Joel Rogers
Director
Mayors Innovation Project (MIP) is a national peer learning network of mayors committed to building the high-road in cities. In 2023, mayors and city leaders from 116 cities came together to share policy ideas and solutions through various meetings, webinars, and special cohorts. Highlights include:

In partnership with the Water Center at Penn, WaterNow Alliance, and US Water Alliance, our Water Affordability Community of Practice (CoP) spotlighted best practices on challenges related to water affordability. This year, we hosted 4 Water Wednesday webinars aimed at supporting city and utility leaders in creating affordable, efficient, and equitable water systems. Topics included lessons in public engagement, the need for Low Income Household Water Assistance Programs (LIHWAP), water affordability, getting assistance to those in need by utilizing community resource fairs, and a roundtable discussion with mayors on PFAs.

In May, 12 mayors joined the 4th New Mayors Cohort. This cohort offers selected first-term mayors the opportunity to join a small leadership development program informed by current and former mayors, with outreach and curriculum designed to primarily serve mayors who are “firsts” in their respective cities, including first mayors of color, first woman mayors, and first LGBTQ+ mayors. The cohort, composed of mayors from California to Pennsylvania, gathered in person from May 17-19 in Madison, Wisconsin and continued to meet regularly on Zoom to share experiences and identify solutions to their unique challenges as mayors.

We continued advancing the leadership of women mayors through our Women Mayors Network (WMN). The WMN convened at the 2023 Winter Meeting with a lunch presented by the Barbara Lee Family Foundation (BLFF). BLFF Executive Director, Amanda Hunter, presented research and strategies to women mayors on overcoming the obstacles that women candidates and leaders face. In addition, BLFF and the WMN partnered to host a webinar, Campaigning While Female, in September. This webinar provided a space for women mayors to voice struggles and successes and find support in their shared experiences.
In collaboration with AARP Livable Communities and Smart Growth America, we also held our first ever Mayors Institute on Pedestrian Safety (MIPS) cohort. This program aims to support mayors in creating more equitable, vibrant, and safer communities for everyone. The cohort, composed of nine mayors, held five online sessions throughout the year followed by an in-person meeting in Boston, Massachusetts in October. The session gave mayors the opportunity to discuss their critical role in prioritizing safe streets, tour innovative infrastructure to protect pedestrians and bicyclists, discuss best practices for communicating and advocating for pedestrian safety, and celebrate their cities in the first ever pedestrian-safety focused innovation showcase.

Twice a year, MIP convenes mayors and other experts for informal exchange and fellowship and deep dives on a limited number of issues pre-selected by the MIP steering committee, which consists overwhelmingly of current and former mayors. Lead topics at our 2023 Winter Meeting included leading under a microscope, locating funding sources to advance community growth, conscious leadership during polarizing times, and equitable solutions for pedestrian safety.

In MIP’s 2023 Summer Meeting, we delved into housing quality and tenant protections, electric vehicle implementation, fiscal transparency, and the city’s role in private sector job quality.

With the goal of providing city leaders with policy ideas they can implement in their own cities, we released 10 blog posts including our Good Ideas for Cities series. Topics included expanding broadband infrastructure, tips for reducing lead exposure, best practices for transitioning to electric vehicles, and more.

One of the benefits of joining the Mayors Innovation Project is access to technical assistance from staff and policy experts. This year members requested policy memos related to pop-up shops, greenfields, and resources to support homeless LGBTQ+ youth.
One of High Road Strategy Centers’ oldest areas of programming concerns Work and Opportunity. Since 1996, annually, we’ve released a State of Working Wisconsin report highlighting the Wisconsin economy’s performance, judged from the perspective of workers.

On Labor Day 2023, we released the latest State of Working Wisconsin, highlighting Wisconsin’s record-breaking labor market growth while illustrating the inequities that continue as inflation supersedes wage increases.

Alongside the report, we teamed up with The Havens Wright Center for Social Justice to present Workers’ Views of Working in Wisconsin, a virtual panel discussion to hear directly from workers engaged in workplace organizing and learn about their efforts to improve jobs in the state. The event was held in September and included testimonials from workers in several industries including the restaurant and hospitality sector.

In 2023, we also released two reports analyzing the effects of low wages for workers in Wisconsin.

Facts from the Frontline, published in March, explores Milwaukee’s job sector shift from union manufacturing jobs to low-wage, non-union service jobs.

Can’t Survive on $7.25, released in October, details the importance of raising Wisconsin’s minimum wage which has not changed since 2009 despite the ever-rising cost of living.
STATE SMART TRANSPORTATION INITIATIVE

The State Smart Transportation Initiative (SSTI) is a project of High Road Strategy Center, administered jointly for many years with Smart Growth America. It focuses on getting state governments, and many local ones, focused on high-road transportation strategies.

The State Smart Transportation Initiative's Community of Practice meetings offer a unique peer learning opportunity focused on conversations between Department of Transportation CEOs, SSTI staff, and invited experts. In 2023, we held our annual Community of Practice meeting in Hartford, Connecticut in which 12 DOT leaders plus staff engaged in off-site tours and recent quick-build projects designed to reduce speeds and improve safety, learned about efforts to reconnect communities divided by highways in Hartford, and discussed topics related to climate, infrastructure, and workforce development.

We strive to be a go-to resource on transportation policy and practice for local and state governments and practitioners. Throughout 2023, we released 44 blog posts that highlight critical discussions and research happening in the transportation field, pulling from a wide range of academic and industry sources. Some of our most popular blogs include:

**State DOTs are helping locals set lower speed limits:** In response to mounting safety issues, more transportation agencies are recognizing the importance of managing traffic speeds—a shift from long-held practices that prioritize vehicle speed. As the leading authorities across much of the U.S., state DOTs are stepping up to the task.

**Adding road capacity is fruitless, another study finds:** As cities grow and traffic increases, road capacity investments offer diminishing returns and even make traffic worse, according to a recent international study. Looking at 24 cities across the globe, researchers found that for every one-percent increase in road capacity, average traffic speeds drop 0.014 percent. Public transportation doesn't suffer the same consequences.

**The work commute changed after the pandemic, new data shows:** Research continues to shed new light on the post-pandemic changes in travel behavior and access to opportunities. Recent analyses show the lasting impacts of the pandemic on peak travel times, giving transportation professionals valuable insights for adapting planning and design to improve overall access and system performance.
During our **Measuring Accessibility** series, we released 4 **webinars** aimed at analyzing and discussing ways to make cities and states more accessible to different opportunities. The webinars were:

**Planning for Success**: Talks with several organizations about how they implement accessibility analysis in planning to improve access to opportunities in the long term.

**Advances in Project Evaluation**: Conversations with MnDOT and Caltrans about addressing equity with accessibility metrics, their latest tool advancements, and takeaways from their recent interactive TRB workshop.

**Expanding the Practice**: Hear from Louis Merlin of Florida Atlantic University and Dana Rowangould of the University of Vermont on their research into how practitioners are measuring pedestrian accessibility and access by other modes.

**National Evaluation, Local Application**: Discussion with researchers at the University of Minnesota’s Accessibility Observatory about their collaborative effort to document access to opportunity at a national scale. Maryland DOT (MDOT) also shares their perspective on using the resulting data in state performance measurement and local planning and more!

SSTI continues sharing best practices through **research and technical assistance** that informs transformative and replicable transportation efforts across the U.S. Over the course of the year, SSTI has provided technical assistance to the following:

- **California (Caltrans)**: In partnership with UC-Davis, SSTI is working with Caltrans and the California Air Resources Board to leverage accessibility analysis for performance tracking, project evaluation, and mitigating VMT.
- **Minnesota**: We continued to support the Minnesota DOT as they work toward meeting ambitious VMT reduction targets. This included a field scan and internal focus groups to identify challenges, opportunities, and further collaboration within the DOT and throughout the state.
- **Rural Complete Streets**: In early 2023, SSTI worked with Smart Growth America to host a four-part virtual workshop for DOT staff to overcome the challenges of delivering Complete Streets on rural highways. About 30 staff from nine states took part.
- **SSTI Climate Cohort and Sustainability Network**: SSTI supports agency staff from across the country through its sustainability network. In 2023, this included developing carbon reduction strategies, implementing the National Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (NEVI) program, preparing for new tracking requirements, and working toward other internal sustainability goals. The program was recently bolstered through a partnership with the Georgetown Climate Center.
Progressive Local Government for the 21st Century (ProGov21) is a non-partisan, fully searchable digital library of progressive policies and practices for local government. Our library includes laws, proposed legislation, ballot measures, executive orders, policy analyses, case studies, and more.

We released 9 roadmaps in 2023 including both new and updated road maps which provided guides and resources for taking concrete action to address critical issues at the local level. For 2023, topics included reproductive health, immigration, land use, housing, and many more. Our most popular roadmaps were:

**Public Finance**: Released in June, the public finance roadmap delves into high-road progressive finance and revenue policies to equitably maintain and improve public investment and increase trust in local government.

**Recreation**: Released in October, the recreation roadmap focuses on what city leaders can do to create more vibrant and accessible green spaces, particularly for low-income communities and communities of color.

We compiled all of 2023’s roadmaps into one document, *Crisis, Experimentation, and Prosperity: A Year of Policy Advocacy*. This document covers a wide range of policy areas yet offers pointed recommendations for effective and equitable governance.

Alongside each roadmap, we feature an ordinance and policy to demonstrate concrete solutions to pressing local issues. In 2023, we featured 9 ordinances and 9 policies.

**Two blog posts** were released in 2023. The first, entitled *Public Capital: Industrial Policy and the Emerging Landscape of Economic Governance*, served as the inaugural post to a new publication series on progressive political economy — particularly in the context of ongoing inequality, stagnation, and ecological crisis. In May, we released *New Land Value-Capture Strategies for Strong Communities*, which delves into critical land value-capture policies that increase property value, ultimately benefiting communities through Special Assessment Districts (SADs), Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), and more.
In May, we launched Government Performance Action & Learning (GPAL), a site dedicated to making public community data accessible to all. In partnership with Polco, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), Arizona State University, and the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, GPAL works alongside local government leaders, academics, and data scientists to create the nation’s most comprehensive public sector data set.

GPAL brings relevant community information together in simple but comprehensive dashboards. It allows government officials, researchers, and academics to see connections between disparate community data that, before now, only lived in siloed sources. GPAL data is used for local government decision-making, community research, and so much more.

Since its inception, over 300 variables have been coded and over 25 cities have used GPAL’s accessible dashboard.

High Road Strategy Center also works closely with and lends staff to the Educational Partnerships for Innovation in Communities Network (EPIC-N), an international network of roughly 100 university- or city-based programs using the EPIC Model of university-community engagement. 2023 saw major expansion of EPIC-N in Latin America, with new programs started in Mexico, Brazil, and Ecuador. It also saw deepening in Africa and Asia, and some expansion in the US itself. EPIC programs use the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) as a framework for judging their work. To date, they’ve completed more than 2000 SDG-advancing projects in some 400 diverse communities worldwide.
THANK YOU!

OUR WORK IS MADE POSSIBLE BY GENEROUS SUPPORTERS LIKE YOU.