

# CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

**Welcome to the Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) for Berks County. This is our full-length document that provides context and detail to support future transportation funding and projects for Berks County's highways, bridges, and transit infrastructure. This plan addresses how we can meet the expectations for the Berks County transportation system over the next 20 years.**

This plan focuses on maintenance and safety rather than adding capacity to the transportation network. It identifies nearly \$2 billion in transportation projects through 2050. Progress has been made to improve poor bridges, improve safety, and to bring our county transportation infrastructure to modern standards, but there is always more to be done. Funding is limited and costs associated with projects continue to increase over time, all while our roads and bridges continue to age.

From 2024 to 2026, we spoke with many Berks County residents about their opinions, issues, and needs related to the existing transportation system. The challenges for us and our partners to build, operate, and maintain a system that meets the needs of Berks County have never been greater. To meet these challenges, this plan presents quality information in understandable terms and is flexible enough to adapt to a constantly changing landscape of needs and resources. We have strived to bring transparency to the tough transportation decisions that we have to make every day.

Our transportation system is complex. At approximately 865 square miles, Berks County is a large county ranking 18<sup>th</sup> largest in the state by area. It has nearly 3,300 miles of roads and approximately 880 bridges. The highway network is the backbone of Berks County's transportation system. Although most households have at least one car for transportation, some people remain transit dependent. Local bus service, as well as paratransit service for persons with disabilities and elderly residents, is provided in and around the Reading metro area. Intercity bus service links the region to adjacent counties, Philadelphia and New York City. Taxi service is available in the region. Although trucks handle most of the region's freight shipments, rail service is available via Norfolk Southern and several local railroads. Passenger rail service continues to be promoted and supported through coordination between local, state, and federal organizations and programs. The County's primary aviation facility, Reading Regional Airport, provides general aviation, corporate, and charter passenger services. Walkways, bikeways, greenways, and other transportation enhancements are growing alternatives to motorized transportation and are discussed in this plan.

## VISION STATEMENT

**The Reading Area Transportation Study will promote a well maintained and balanced multimodal transportation system that will safely and efficiently move people and goods.**



Transportation decision making and funding is spread among many partners—legislators, PennDOT, local governments, RATS MPO, the Berks County Planning Commission, transit providers, privately-owned rail freight operators, transportation stakeholders and many others. In this document, we offer a snapshot of how these partners relate and how their respective transportation assets interconnect. Together, these pieces and partners form Berks County’s transportation system.

Each Urbanized Area (UA) in the United States with a population of 50,000 or more is required by federal regulation to have a designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) to facilitate transportation planning on the local level. In Pennsylvania, there are 19 MPOs. The Reading Area Transportation Study (RATS) is the regional transportation planning organization for the Reading, Pennsylvania metropolitan area. The Reading MPO covers all of Berks County. Because the Reading urbanized area has a population greater than 200,000, the Reading MPO is designated as a Transportation Management Area (TMA). RATS facilitates the regional, performance-based planning process that serves as the basis for spending state and federal transportation funds for improvements to streets, highways, bridges, public transit, bicycle and pedestrian networks allocated to Berks County.

Created in 1964, RATS is comprised of two committees – the Technical Committee and the Coordinating Committee. The Technical Committee reviews items brought before the group and recommends actions to the Coordinating Committee. The Coordinating Committee is the policy body that formally adopts or approves items reviewed by the Technical Committee.

### The eight-member RATS Technical Committee consists of representatives from:

- PennDOT Central Office in Harrisburg (1)
- PennDOT District 5-0 Office in Allentown (1)
- City of Reading (2)
- Berks County Planning Commission (2)
- South Central Transit Authority (SCTA) (1)
- Reading Regional Airport Authority (RRAA) (1)

### The ten-member RATS Coordinating Committee consists of one representative each from:

- PennDOT Central Office in Harrisburg
- PennDOT District 5-0 Office in Allentown
- Berks County Board of Commissioners
- Berks County Planning Commission
- City of Reading
- Boroughs
- 1<sup>st</sup> Class Townships
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Townships
- South Central Transit Authority (SCTA)
- Reading Regional Airport Authority (RRAA)

RATS is responsible for prioritizing approximately \$62 million annually to advance highway and bridge transportation projects throughout the County. Additional funding for transit projects is prioritized and programmed in coordination with South Central Transit Authority for BARTA in Berks County. Funding from various discretionary grant programs is also planned and programmed based on the program requirements. PennDOT, SCTA, and municipalities are responsible for project implementation.

The transportation planning staff of the Berks County Planning Commission serves as the technical staff to RATS. The staff coordinates and administers these committees, their meetings, and leads development of the package of federally required MPO products or programs including, but not

limited to: the Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP), short-range Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), associated transportation conformity determinations (if required), the Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP), and the Congestion Management Process (CMP).

The TIP is a capital-funding program that contains all surface transportation projects eligible for federal funding and programmed for implementation over the next four years. The UPWP identifies yearly work tasks that RATS will accomplish to meet the goals and objectives outlined in the LRTP. Since Berks County is a Transportation Management Area (TMA), RATS uses the CMP to monitor and manage traffic congestion in an effort to maximize the use of existing roads and improve air quality.

# THE LONG RANGE TRANSPORTATION PLAN

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The LRTP discusses socioeconomic trends affecting travel, the current state of the County transportation network, and characterizes transportation needs and multimodal transportation strategies to address these needs. The plan must be reviewed and updated every four years. The last plan was updated and approved in 2022. The RATS LRTP must be consistent with both federal and state guidelines, as well as with the Pennsylvania statewide LRTP.

This plan uses performance-based and data driven planning to support more effective and structured project selection and programming decisions. In addition, this plan incorporates a lowest life-cycle cost approach, focusing on making improvements to extend the life cycles of roadways and bridges. The plan outlines the region's long-range transportation vision and identifies the projects that are necessary through the year 2050 in order to attain that vision. Most importantly, federal funding cannot be allocated to transportation projects unless they are included within the list of projects that is included in this plan. The projects must be fiscally constrained, meaning that RATS cannot plan to spend more money than it reasonably expects to receive.

The primary focus of this plan is “asset management” – to maintain and improve the County's transportation system with an emphasis on making better use of existing highway, bridge and transit facilities, while seeking to improve safety and reduce traffic congestion, energy consumption, and motor vehicle emissions. Due to its size and topography, Berks County has countless transportation assets – ranging from thousands of miles of roads, approximately 880 bridges, hundreds of miles of rail track to fleets of buses. Many parts of the County transportation network have reached the end of their designed life span and have deteriorated over time.

The amount of financial resources we have to preserve every bridge and road is small in comparison to the transportation needs for Berks County. The federal gas tax has not increased since 1993 and is used to help fund highway, bridge, and transit improvements. In Pennsylvania, the general Motor License Fund is a dedicated account used to support the state's transportation needs. The account is funded primarily through gas taxes and vehicle-related fees. In an effort to help fund growing transportation needs across Pennsylvania, the state increased the gas tax by three cents on January 1, 2023. This increase was repealed at the state level shortly after the increase took effect. These funding resources for transportation improvements continue to diminish as use of fuel efficient, alternative fuel vehicles, and construction costs have increased. This plan leverages expected revenues to best address the needs of maintaining the transportation system through proper asset management and the implementation of low-cost operation improvements where feasible.

RATS has considered all locally available modes of transportation in compiling this plan, including the existing and future highway system, railroads, air travel, public transit, bicycle and pedestrian travel, and methods for improving intermodal connections for freight. Elements of the plan include an inventory of the County's transportation system, a listing of current and future problems that will need to be addressed, and a discussion of strategies to alleviate or eliminate these problems and achieve the stated goals and objectives by the year 2050.

It is important to note that while this plan focuses on the future of the transportation system, data obtained and used to address future considerations is derived from the past. The transportation

system was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, some of the data obtained for 2020 yielded skewed results as travel was restricted and remote work options became available. Deviations in data and information resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic are identified where applicable throughout this plan.

## Plan Consistency

RATS considered previously developed plans and policies to ensure consistency in direction. At the federal level, it must be consistent with applicable laws, rules, and regulations. It must be consistent with the state's transportation plans, programs, and policies. It must also be consistent with the policies and objectives of the Berks County Comprehensive Plan. Those requirements are summarized below.

## Federal Transportation Requirements (MAP-21, FAST Act, and IIJA)

The RATS 2050 LRTP is governed by many pieces of federal legislation over time that have incorporated various goals and approaches that MPOs need to follow. The Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Act (MAP-21) of 2012 helped establish a performance-based program and federal planning factors that need to be addressed and incorporated in the transportation planning program. The performance-based approach includes the establishment of performance measures and targets to help achieve goals and objectives. The Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act of 2015 continued the emphasis on safety and strengthened the relationship between planning and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The federal planning factors and their relationship to this plan, as well as performance measures and targets are identified in Chapter 4 – Recommendations of this LRTP.

The most recent federal legislation, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) of 2021, authorized \$351 billion for highway and bridge programs and \$91 billion for transit programs over the federal fiscal years 2022 through 2026. Pennsylvania's allocation for highway and bridge programs was approximately \$13 billion with approximately \$3.3 billion for freight and transit programs over the 5 years. Funds were also allocated for safety programs, climate change mitigation, expansion of the electric vehicle (EV) network, airport infrastructure improvements, and various discretionary grant programs. As of the writing of this plan, the IIJA has not been reauthorized, and a new transportation funding bill has not been established. As a result, funding for projects after FFY 2026 is assumed to remain flat at the last year of the bill's allocation levels. As new legislation is developed and authorized, RATS will continue to incorporate those principles into future transportation planning documents.

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) developed rules to guide the development of performance measures at state and regional levels. Both PennDOT and RATS use performance measures as they carry out Federal-Aid highway programs to assess system performance. This LRTP has addressed MAP-21, FAST Act, and IIJA requirements. RATS, in coordination with PennDOT, will incorporate these measures and targets in current and future LRTP updates.

In addition to MAP-21, FAST Act, and IIJA, a number of other federal and state laws, regulations, executive orders, policy directives, and planning frameworks influence and guide this plan:

- United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) 23 CFR (Code of Federal Regulation) Parts 450 and 500, and 49 CFR Part 613
- Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990
- United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Conformity Regulation (40 CFR Parts 51 and 93)
- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and related Presidential Executive Orders

### State Transportation Requirements

PennDOT established a Statewide Long Range Transportation Plan and a comprehensive Freight Movement Plan (FMP) that were adopted in 2021. Statewide plans are also required to be compliant with federal transportation regulations. Both of these plans are currently being updated with completion anticipated to be in June 2026. Additional statewide plans that are considered and discussed throughout this LRTP include, but are not limited to:

- Pennsylvania State Rail Plan
- Pennsylvania Statewide Airport System Plan
- Pennsylvania Active Transportation Plan
- Historic Metal Truss Bridge Management Plan
- Pennsylvania Strategic Highway Safety Plan
- Regional Operations Plans

The RATS LRTP is consistent with the overall goals and policies of state and federal guidance. PennDOT continues to enhance and reassess performance measures and targets for the state. RATS has adopted performance measures and targets set by PennDOT. Chapter 4 – Recommendations further addresses performance measures and targets. It should be noted that this LRTP uses PennDOT-sourced data for pavement and bridge conditions, crash statistics, and relevant freight data so that our local performance targets and the data supporting them are consistent.

### Berks County Comprehensive Plan

The Berks County Planning Commission updated the County Comprehensive Plan in 2020. A new County Comprehensive Plan is currently in development. The goals and objectives of the RATS LRTP are a component of the Berks County Comprehensive Plan. This ensures consistency between the two planning processes.

### RATS Long Range Transportation Plan Steering Committee

To ensure plan consistency and consideration of all modes of transportation, MPO staff established the RATS LRTP Steering Committee in July 2024. The Steering Committee included federal, state, and local transportation organizations and stakeholders that helped coordinate, review and advise MPO staff throughout the development of this LRTP. The first meeting of the Steering Committee was held in August 2024, and quarterly meetings thereafter were conducted virtually throughout the development process. The committee provided valuable insight in identifying current transportation system trends and future considerations based on trends identified throughout the document.

### Public Participation

Early efforts were made to engage and gather public input prior to development of the plan. A total of 14 initial public outreach meetings were conducted. The first set of public outreach meetings, held in October 2024, focused on development of the Vision Statement, Goals, and Objectives of the LRTP. Additionally, preliminary discussions regarding current transportation issues and needs were conducted. The second set of public outreach meetings, held in April and May 2025, focused on providing the public the opportunity to discuss current and potential future transportation issues and needs relating to any and all modes of transportation in Berks County. The majority of meetings were held in person across Berks County. For each set of initial public outreach meetings, at least one virtual meeting was available using Microsoft Teams.

As part of the initial public outreach, a survey was available for Berks County residents to provide input on the Vision Statement, Goals, Objectives, and identify transportation-related issues and needs.

MPO staff also participated in several opportunities to engage the public. A presentation on the LRTP and the development process was made to Reading City Council members at their Committee of the Whole meeting in May 2025. Council members provided input on current transportation issues and needs within the City of Reading. MPO staff sought public input at the Berks County Office of Aging Open House event. Participants provided insight into mobility and accessibility issues and needs within the transportation system. Additionally, MPO staff, as part of the Berks County Planning Commission Joint Comprehensive Planning Program, encouraged various Joint Comprehensive Planning committees to participate in RATS public outreach meetings and events, providing input on future transportation considerations within those Joint Planning regions.

Finally, MPO staff developed an LRTP Development Portal on Berks County Planning Commission's website, where the public could view draft maps and sections as they were prepared throughout the development process, LRTP Steering Committee meeting notes, and an anticipated timeline ending with the adoption/approval of the RATS LRTP. Documentation of public outreach efforts can be found in the TIP and LRTP Appendices document.

### Plan Adoption

The LRTP is adopted by RATS and is provided for information purposes to decision makers of its member jurisdictions, the FHWA, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), PennDOT, South Central Transit Authority (SCTA), and most importantly, the public. Once the plan is approved, projects identified in the plan are eligible for federal and state funding. Inclusion of a project on either the LRTP or Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) is not a commitment of funds, an obligation of funds or a grant of funds. Projects included in the project lists will be scheduled for funding and construction within current and future RATS Transportation Improvement Plans (TIPs). All projects programmed in these TIPs must first be identified in the LRTP or consistent with LRTP goals.

Projects identified in the LRTP that are on the short-range project lists will be programmed first as part of TIP development, which is updated every two years. Additionally, projects from the mid-range and long-range lists may also be advanced for funding and construction in the next two-year update of the TIP in FFY 2029, as identified in the state's Twelve Year Program (TYP), and before this LRTP is updated again by FFY 2031. Should the need arise to revise or amend this LRTP prior to the 4-year update cycle, RATS will follow the procedures identified in the RATS Public Participation Plan, as well as the guidance provided by PennDOT and the Federal Highway Administration. Additional information relating to the LRTP amendment procedure can be found in the TIP and LRTP Appendix document.