

Why Maine needs the Transportation Climate Initiative



Bill Sikes | AP

FILE - In this Aug. 12, 2016, file photo, traffic crawls eastbound on Interstate 84 in Sturbridge, Mass., after an overnight accident involving two tractor-trailers on the Massachusetts Turnpike. An alliance of Northeast and mid-Atlantic states are working on a pact aimed at lowering carbon emissions from cars, trucks and other means of transportation. A draft version of the agreement, known as the Transportation and Climate Initiative, was released Tuesday, Dec. 17, 2019. (AP Photo/Bill Sikes, File)

By Phelps Turner, Opinion guest column - January 26, 2020

[Click here to view online.](#)

As any Mainer knows, we have a transportation problem. And it unfortunately goes beyond limited access to public transit and **chronic underfunding** of our transportation infrastructure. The greenhouse gas emissions from cars, trucks and buses are the **largest contributor** to the climate crisis, and it's getting worse.

We need to clean up our transportation system if we want to prevent the worst impacts of climate change, but the federal government is shirking its responsibility to solve this problem. That's where the **Transportation Climate Initiative** comes in. Several mid-Atlantic and New England **states**, plus Washington, D.C., have come together to propose a solution to cut the dangerous emissions that are pouring out of the transportation sector.

TCI will require suppliers of gasoline and diesel fuel to pay for the pollution they create by purchasing permits, with the total amount that fuel suppliers are allowed to pollute decreasing each year. The money that results from the permit payments will go directly to states for investments in clean transportation options, like electric buses running expanded schedules, electric shuttles and vanpools for commuting, safer bike lanes, and improved walking paths.

TCl is expected to generate initial annual proceeds of at least \$1.4 billion across New England and Mid-Atlantic states. If Maine were to [sign on](#), we could expect to see public health benefits and avoided climate impacts worth millions of dollars.

This is an innovative and bold way to confront the climate crisis, clean up our transportation system, and increase opportunities to work remotely through expanded broadband access. But we need to get the details right from the beginning.

Some of our neighbors have been disproportionately impacted by terrible air pollution and have lacked access to good, affordable transportation options for generations. TCl [presents an opportunity](#) to not only tackle climate change, but also correct some of these inequalities and longstanding public health issues while ensuring that such changes are affordable for low-income and rural residents.

Our state leaders must take advantage of this opportunity.

Beyond the obvious climate benefits, true transportation justice for everyone from Kittery to Presque Isle, Jackman to Eastport, must be the goal. Transportation justice results from policies that help urban, suburban, and rural low-income residents see much-needed transportation investments while improving climate and public health impacts.

Funds from TCl should be invested in transportation options that predominantly serve these residents. The funds should also go towards replacing dirty diesel school buses with clean electric versions that will protect both our climate and our children's health. TCl proceeds should be invested in high-speed internet in rural communities to reduce the transportation needs of our residents or expand resilient infrastructure between major corridors and rural village centers. By investing in clean transportation, we will address climate change, improve air quality, make it easier and safer for residents to travel, and spur economic development.

As one of the most rural states in the country, Maine has some unique transportation and mobility challenges. We deserve affordable, reliable solutions that get us to work, to stores and appointments, and to our favorite outdoor places while reducing dangerous air pollution.

In December, the states participating in TCI released [a draft](#) of the plan for just how they will get this done. The [public comment](#) period is now open, and we need to urge our leaders to think big about how to solve this crisis while ensuring that no one gets left behind, especially those that suffer through dirty air pollution while receiving no benefit and lacking safe transportation options.

At a time when the federal government is utterly failing to protect us from the impacts of climate change, we need state-level policies like TCI more than ever. If it's done right, we will all see the benefits. Now isn't the time for half-measures that only make a dent in the problem. Let's get to work creating a clean transportation system for the future that benefits all Mainers.

Phelps Turner is a senior attorney at Conservation Law Foundation in Portland.