



Transportation

October 18, 2024

Utah is one of the fastest-growing states in the nation.¹ The 3.4 million population is expected to increase to approximately 5 million by 2050.² As Utah's population grows, concerns about roads and transportation grow with it.

Commutes

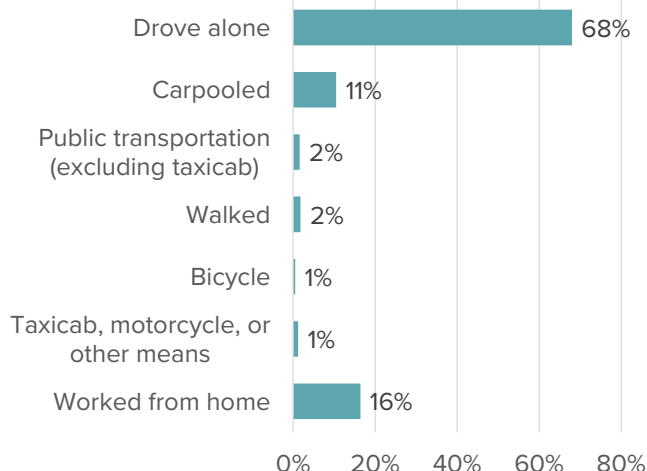
Utahns spend about 23 minutes getting to work each day.³ Most drive alone. Over 16% – the next largest group – work from home. (See Figure 1.)

Commute times and road usage vary by household but are also tied to location. For instance, Salt Lake City residents spent approximately 87 hours per year driving on roadways in 2023, with 22 hours allotted to traffic congestion—3.5 hours more than the previous year.⁴ This is perhaps due to an increase in vehicle miles traveled.⁵ Commuters can expect to travel about 6 miles in 10 minutes during the morning rush and 12 minutes during the evening rush.

During peak hours, 49% of Utah's urban interstate highways are considered congested, ranking 19th most congested in the nation in 2021.⁶ It should be noted that despite concerns and frustration about traffic congestion, Utah residents have shorter commutes than the national average.

Most Utahns travel to work alone.

Figure 1: How Utahns Travel to Work



Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Multimodal Transportation

Alternative transportation help mitigate traffic, congestion, and environmental concerns. One of the best ways to reduce passenger vehicle emissions is by decreasing the number of single-occupancy trips by using alternative transportation. The Utah Transit Authority's Zero Fare for Clean Air provides no-fare days for all UTA bus and rail services on certain days throughout the year.⁷

Teleworking can also prove to be a viable option for mitigating air pollution given its low implementation costs.⁸ A pilot study implementing a telework program administered by the State of Utah showed positive results, indicating improved air quality though a significant emissions reduction.⁹

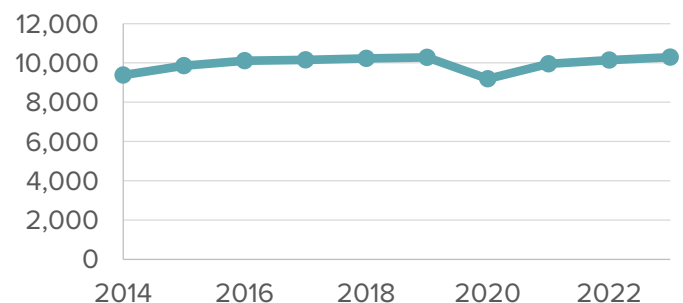
Infrastructure

Utah's rapid growth has presented a range of concerns, not only for its residents and resources, but also its road infrastructure. An increase in population also means an increase in vehicles on the roads, which translates to an increase in road damage.

Utah has had mixed results regarding transportation infrastructure and road conditions. The American Society of Civil Engineers rated Utah's overall infrastructure with a

Vehicle miles traveled back up since COVID.

Figure 2: Annual Miles Traveled per Utahn, 2014-2023



Source: Utah Department of Transportation.

C-plus, while a study completed by the Reason Foundation ranked Utah’s highway system as 10th in the nation, in larger part arterial pavement condition and rural interstate pavement conditions.¹⁰

Revenue Sources

Several revenue sources fund the maintenance, preservation, and improvements of the state’s roadways, including motor fuel taxes, special fuel taxes, vehicle registration, and the Transportation Investment Fund or TIF. The TIF is the main funding source for state-owned, capacity-increasing roadway projects and is mostly funded using a portion of auto-related Utah state sales tax – which is approximately 17 percent of Utah state sales tax – plus an additional three percent of state sales tax.¹¹

About six percent of Utah’s budget is spent on transportation – which in 2023 was \$1.3 billion.¹² Utah spends \$180 million annually to maintain its road infrastructure. The Utah Department of Transportation projects that the state will need \$27 million more each year to meet Utahn needs.¹³ Moreover, the Wasatch Front Regional Council’s 2023 Regional Transportation Plan indicates that funding sources have been identified for most of the prioritized projects, but there is still an estimated \$5.2 billion funding gap left unmet.

Road Usage Charge

A road usage charge – or RUC – is a fee imposed on drivers based on the distance they travel. Utah intro-

duced a RUC program in 2020, which is voluntary for owners of electric, plug-in hybrid, and gasoline hybrid vehicles.¹⁴

This shift from fuel taxes to mileage-based charges offers a potential revenue source for the state’s transportation needs, especially considering the rise of alternative fuel vehicles and the inadequacy of fuel taxes for maintenance costs. While reducing RUC rates for fuel-efficient vehicles is feasible, it contradicts the aim of ensuring an even contribution to road upkeep.

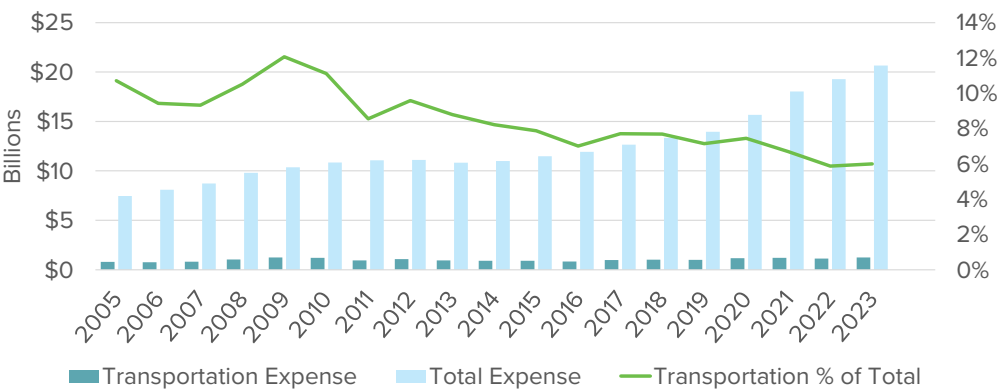
RUC programs facilitate congestion pricing, tolling, and provide valuable data for transportation planning, including assessing driving patterns and the impact of urban development. Additional charges during periods of poor air quality aims to discourage driving and fund clean air initiatives.

What Utahns Want

Urban Utah residents want significant investments in public and active transportation.¹⁵ A majority support a transportation option focusing on new development in town centers with convenient walking, biking, and public transportation and more funding for public transportation and bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure. Meanwhile, rural Utahns expressed wanting better transportation connections such as public transportation services connecting small towns to large cities and a statewide passenger rail system.

Utah’s proportion of spending on transportation has trended down.

Figure 3: Transportation Spending in Utah, 2005-2023



Source: The State of Utah, Annual Comprehensive Financial Report.

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This research brief was written by Maimia Natividad and Kyler Zarate with assistance from other Utah Foundation staff.

Endnotes

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