

1. Introduction and Background





1.1 Introduction

What's the plan?

Iowans rely on the transit system to get around. Public transit helps reduce traffic by shuttling commuters to work, ensures people get to their medical appointments on time, and takes folks to shopping and entertainment spots, among other things. Public transit aims to connect everyone in the easiest, most efficient, and safest way possible. The Iowa Department of Transportation (DOT) is working with transit agencies and stakeholders to develop and implement this Public Transit Long Range Plan to make the best use of limited resources to support a strong statewide transit system.

Why are we updating the plan?

Planning is a collaborative and cyclical process, where plans are in a continuous cycle of being developed, implemented, assessed, and revised. This Plan documents the understanding of trends leading up to the current situation, identifies current and potential future needs and gaps, and presents courses of action to address those needs through efficient allocation of resources. Long-range transportation plans, such as the Iowa Public Transit Long Range Plan, are generally updated every five years to stay current with the contemporary operating environment, emerging trends, legislation, funding, and technological developments. The previous version of this plan was developed in 2020. This update will help the Iowa DOT stay current with the modern environment of public transit.

What is in the Plan?

Plan content includes the following:

- **Trends:** An analysis of demographic, economic, and ridership data and what these trends mean for Iowa's public transit system.
- **Needs:** Deficiencies, gaps, and shortfalls identified through condition assessments and stakeholder input related to transit service, facilities, vehicles, personnel, and technology.
- **Vision:** Broad, overarching areas within which strategies have been defined to implement the Plan, including partnering, service, facility/fleet/personnel, and funding.
- **Strategies:** Actions and initiatives that will be utilized by the department and stakeholders to implement the vision.
- **Costs and revenue:** An analysis of anticipated capital and operating costs as well as anticipated revenue through the planning horizon.
- **Implementation:** A discussion related to addressing any funding shortfalls, programming future investments, and continuous performance monitoring.

What is Public Transit?

Public transit refers to forms of transportation that are available for use by the general public, other than their personal vehicles. It plays a crucial role in urban planning and development by providing an efficient and cost-effective means of transportation. The benefits of public transit are numerous: it reduces traffic congestion, lowers greenhouse gas emissions, and decreases the reliance on personal vehicles. Additionally, public transit promotes social equity by providing affordable transportation options for all socioeconomic groups, and it can stimulate local economies by improving access to jobs, education, and services. Overall, public transit is a vital component of sustainable urban living, contributing to the health and well-being of communities. Public transit provides incredibly valuable connections in rural areas as well, especially as more and more old lowan's chose to live in rural areas.

The mission of the Iowa DOT's Modal Transportation Bureau Public Transit Team is to advocate and deliver services that support and promote a safe and comprehensive public transit system in Iowa to enhance access to opportunities and quality of life. This mission is not only a guiding principal for current transit programs and partnerships, but also directly informs the development and implementation of the Public Transit Long Range Plan.

The Iowa DOT administers federal and state public transit grants and provides technical assistance to Iowa's 19 urban public transit systems and 16 regional public transit systems. Public transit systems work with local human service agencies to provide coordinated transportation in their respected areas. They also rely on state and federal transit funding to keep rides accessible and affordable for lowans. The usage of local funding and contract revenue are important for getting state matches.

The last comprehensive statewide public transit plan was the Iowa in Motion Public Transit Long-Range Plan, adopted in 2020. The first was the Iowa in Motion Transit System Plan, adopted in 1999. Between those 2 plans, the Iowa DOT has conducted more specific planning efforts including the Iowa Statewide Passenger Transportation Funding Study in 2009, the Iowa Park and Ride System Plan in 2014, and the Iowa DOT Transit Asset Management Group Plan in 2022.

While these plans and studies each have their specific focus, this Plan looks at the public transit system more comprehensively. This will enable Iowa's public transit partners to take a fresh look at public transit from today's perspective. This Plan seeks to coordinate planning, programming, and technical assistance statewide to support public transit operations at the local level. The goal with the newly updated Plan is to provide specific strategies and improvements that can be implemented and revisited over time.



1.2 Previous Iowa Passenger and Transit Planning Efforts

Over the last 20 years, the Iowa DOT has built upon various system plans and updates by focusing on specific facets of public transit. The Iowa Public Transit Long Range Plan represents the most recent iteration of this continuous process.



Iowa in Motion Transit System Plan (1999)

The 1999 Iowa In Motion Transit System Plan was completed two years after the 1997 Iowa in Motion long-range plan was approved by the Iowa Transportation Commission. The document outlined a comprehensive strategy for implementation of the Commission's transportation policy to "Encourage and assist in the development, preservation, maintenance, improvement, and efficient use of all transportation systems – transit systems and services." The Modal Transportation Bureau of the Iowa DOT is responsible for administering that policy through coordination with other department offices, programming of federal and state funds, and providing technical support.



Iowa Statewide Passenger Transportation Funding Study (2009)

In 2009, legislation directed the Iowa DOT, in cooperation with the Office of Energy Independence and the Department of Natural Resources, to review the current revenues available for support of public transit and the sufficiency of those revenues to meet future needs. The review included the identification of public transit improvements needed to meet state energy independence goals and an assessment of how the state's support of public transit is positioned to meet the mobility needs of Iowa's growing senior population. The Iowa Statewide Passenger Transportation Funding Study was produced in response to this need and submitted to the governor and the general assembly for consideration.



Iowa Park and Ride System Plan (2014)

The Iowa Park and Ride System Plan was designed by the Iowa DOT to plan, evaluate, and develop a formal statewide system of park and ride facilities. These facilities were established to serve the purpose of providing a place to park a vehicle when carpooling, vanpooling, or taking public transit. The need for a more formalized park and ride system was initially identified through input from residents who contacted the Iowa DOT seeking information related to the location of existing park and ride facilities. The need for a formal park and ride system plan was the outcome of periodic planning-level reviews of the existing system by the Iowa DOT's Systems Planning and Modal Transportation Bureaus.



Iowa In Motion 2050 State Transportation Plan (2022)

The Iowa In Motion 2050 Plan, adopted by the Iowa Transportation Commission in 2022, is the most recent long-range plan developed by the Iowa DOT. This plan covers all modes of transportation and provides the long range vision, policies, and decision-making framework to guide investments. This document is updated every five years to stay current with trends, forecasts, and factors that influence decision-making, such as system needs, technological changes, and state priorities. The Plan provides direction for each transportation mode, including public transit, and supports a continued emphasis on stewardship.



Iowa Transit Asset Management Group (2022)

The Iowa DOT Modal Transportation Bureau, through the Transit Asset Management Group Plan, provides funding priorities and technical assistance, as well as many other services and program oversight functions, to aid in assessment of the current condition of capital assets for group participants. This is done by determining the condition and performance of assets, identifying unacceptable risks, and providing guidance and technical assistance to stakeholders, allowing them to balance and prioritize reasonably anticipated funds toward improving asset condition and achieving a sufficient level of performance.



Iowa Public Transit Long Range Plan (2020)

The Iowa Public Transit Long Range Plan provides a comprehensive analysis of the entirety of public transit efforts across the state. The analysis summarizes public transit trends and needs across the state, establishes the vision and strategies for Iowa's public transit, estimates costs and revenue, and provides guidance for implementing public transit for the foreseeable future. This plan is an update of this previous plan.



Previous Passenger and Transit Planning Study Efforts

Iowa Public Transit Association Statewide Transit Economic Impact Study (September 2025)

This study was commissioned by the Iowa Public Transit Association (IPTA) and was conducted by the CyBIZ Lab at Iowa State University, in collaboration with ISU Extension and Outreach's Farm, Food, and Enterprise Development and Community and Economic Development teams. The study aimed to quantify the economic, social, and operational impact of public transit systems across Iowa. It was designed to inform policy makers, transit agencies, and stakeholders about the return on investment (ROI), community benefits, and challenges facing Iowa's 36 public transit systems. The analysis focused on three representative regions—Cedar Rapids (urban), Clinton (small urban), and Atlantic/Southwest Iowa Transit Agency (SWITA) (rural)—to assess transit's role in employment, income, retail spending, and regional development.

The study concluded that public transit in Iowa delivers substantial economic and social value. The study found that for every \$1 invested, the state receives approximately \$3 in return, with urban areas seeing even higher ROI ratios. Across Cedar Rapids, Clinton, and SWITA (Region 13), public transit supports over 219 jobs, contributes \$9.7 million in labor income, and enables \$456 million in regional economic output. Transit is a lifeline for many Iowans—with most transit users commuting to work multiple times per week. It plays a critical role in supporting low-income households, seniors, and individuals with disabilities, with 36% of surveyed riders reporting they found or maintained employment because of transit. Riders also cited increased independence, access to healthcare, and financial savings as key benefits.

Despite its impact, Iowa's transit systems face significant challenges, including funding shortfalls due to property tax caps, aging infrastructure, and challenges to fleet modernization. The report recommends diversifying funding sources (e.g., sales tax, vehicle registration fees), investing in ADA-compliant and low-emission vehicles, and strengthening cross-sector partnerships with employers and healthcare providers. A standout example is SWITA's employer-backed workforce transportation model with Menards, which provides over 100,000 rides annually and demonstrates how private-sector collaboration can sustain rural transit and support economic development. These insights underscore the need for strategic investment and policy alignment to ensure transit remains a resilient and equitable service across Iowa.

Des Moines Area Regional Transit Authority Funding Study (October 2022)

This study was commissioned by the Des Moines Area Regional Transit Authority (DART) Alternative Funding Advisory Committee in cooperation with the Iowa Department of Revenue, in order to explore alternative funding sources for DART that do not rely on increasing property taxes. The committee was tasked with identifying effective and efficient funding strategies and reporting findings by December 15, 2022. DART faces a structural deficit projected to reach \$4.7 million in FY25, increasing to \$5.4 million by FY28. The current funding model, heavily reliant on property taxes (62%), is considered unsustainable under the existing levy cap of \$0.95 per \$1,000 assessed valuation. DART lost over four million in Medicaid revenue since Iowa transitioned to a managed care model in 2016. This has increased reliance on local property taxes and administrative burdens.

This study focuses on various alternative funding scenarios. Three main scenarios were evaluated: a 5% Hotel/Motel Tax (\$17.5M in FY25), a 0.125% Sales Tax + Reduced Property Tax (\$15.9M in FY25), and a 0.25% Sales Tax + Eliminate Property Tax (\$31.9M in FY25). A public input survey showed support for identifying alternative revenue sources such as a sales tax, hotel/motel tax, vehicle rental tax, or a TNC ride tax. No formal recommendations were made. Instead, the committee opted to summarize existing studies and data and encourage the legislature to continue the conversation on sustainable transit funding.

I-380 Coralville to Cedar Rapids Corridor Multimodal and Operations Study (2016)

The Iowa DOT initiated this study to complete a comprehensive review of potential strategies to mitigate congestion along the I-380 corridor between Iowa City/Coralville and Cedar Rapids ahead of and in collaboration with reconstruction of the I-80/I-380 system interchange. The purpose of the study was to explore corridor-wide strategies in both the short- and long-term, and three strategy packages emerged – Package 1: Public Interregional Express Bus and Vanpool, Package 2: Public Information/Communications, and Package 3: Additional Congestion Mitigation and Operational Improvement Strategies.

As a result of this study, an Interregional Express Bus (IRXB) service was established referred to as the 380 Express. This service operates multiple stops between Cedar Rapids and Iowa City and is managed by the East Central Iowa Council of Governments (ECICOG). ECICOG has contracted with Windstar Lines, Inc. to operate the bus service for all 380 Express Routes.

Ames-Des Moines I-35 Commuter Corridor Feasibility Study (August 2014)

This study, commissioned by the Des Moines Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (DMAMPO), built on past studies by further investigating the feasibility of operating commuter-orientated transit service in the I-35 corridor between downtown Des Moines, Ankeny, and Ames. Recommendations were developed after examining existing travel markets, ridership potential, transit strategies, capital and operational costs, supportive land uses, and data from major employers.

A strategy was recommended to include commuter express bus service along the I-35 corridor during the weekday peak period to serve the commuter market. In addition, a mid-day deviated fixed route could serve to meet some of the demand for non-work-related trips and provide some access to public transit for rural areas between Ames and Ankeny. In addition to the express and flexible bus service, ridesharing should be used as part of an overall corridor transportation alternatives strategy to provide transportation options for movements not directly served by the I-35 corridor service.



1.3 How This Plan Was Developed

Developing a long-range plan is a multi-step process that requires gathering sufficient information regarding public transit needs and validating that proposed solutions align with available resources and meet the expectations of stakeholders. To facilitate a comprehensive planning process, the feedback of various interagency and external stakeholder groups was collected to develop the Plan.

External Stakeholders

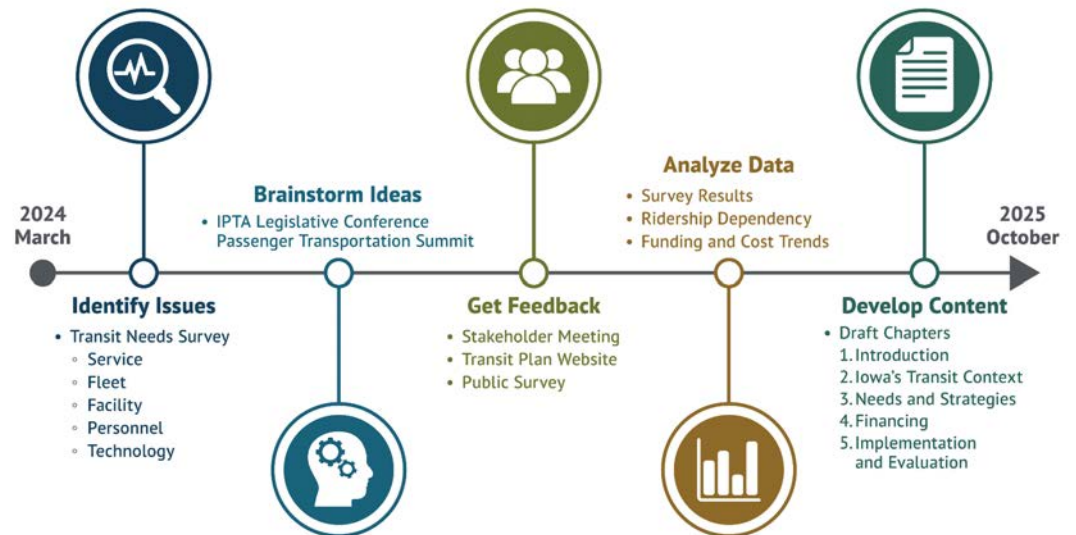
While Iowa DOT staff can shed light on related issues as it pertains to department operations, the only way to truly include a diverse set of viewpoints is to invite participation from representatives across the state, including transit agencies, non-profit organizations, and other state government offices.

Transit Agencies

The Iowa DOT distributes state and federal public transit assistance to public transit systems that have been duly designated as a single administrative agency (public transit system). There are 35 such public transit systems in Iowa which are classified by size with populations 50,000 and greater designated as Large Urban systems, those in urban areas of less than 50,000 population designated as Small Urban systems, and rural areas outside the urban systems designated as regional systems.

Given that they directly interface with public transit riders and manage their own operations, transit agencies were among the first organizations to contribute input for the Plan. The earliest effort was through the Iowa Transit Needs Survey which sought to identify major issues, needs, and gaps in Iowa's public transit system.

Figure 1.1: Public Transit Long Range Plan Timeline



Source: Iowa DOT

In addition to the Transit Needs Survey, the transit agencies were also involved through select representation from the Large Urban, Small Urban, and Regional public transit systems in the External Stakeholder Group. The transit agencies were also informed of Plan progress through regular meetings with the Public Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC), presentations at Iowa Public Transit Association (IPTA) conferences, and through the ridership dependency analysis (all described later in this Plan).

External Stakeholder Group

Given the broad range of public transit ridership challenges, the planning process needs to incorporate as many perspectives as possible to ensure the Plan adequately addresses all needs. As such, it was decided that an External Stakeholder Group would be formed with representation from a diverse range of backgrounds, fields, and viewpoints. This group was primarily used to review themes and strategies prior to them being broadly disseminated.

Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) and Regional Planning Affiliations (RPAs)

Iowa has nine Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) and 18 Regional Planning Affiliations (RPAs). MPOs conduct transportation planning activities in the urbanized areas with more than 50,000 population. These include Ames, Cedar Rapids, Council Bluffs, Davenport, Des Moines, Dubuque, Iowa City, Sioux City, and Waterloo. RPAs conduct transportation planning for the non-metropolitan areas of the state and cover all 99 counties.

The planning activities conducted by these agencies are funded through Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) sources, as well as local financial support. MPOs and RPAs complete several transportation planning activities on regular cycles, including updating their Passenger Transportation Plans (PTPs) at least every five years.

The PTP process provides a needs-based justification for passenger transportation projects as well as incorporating federal requirements for coordinated planning. To support this need for coordination, MPOs and RPAs utilize Transportation Advisory Groups (TAGs) that are locally established and include representation from public transit systems, human service agencies, private transportation providers, non-profit organizations, and other entities. TAGs meet at least two times annually to discuss transportation related matters within the context of their area.

Additionally, the TAG is involved in the drafting of the PTP to ensure that a broad array of viewpoints is considered. An important piece of developing strategies, described in further detail later in this Plan, was a review of the MPO and RPA PTPs to determine gaps and overlaps in needs. This was particularly true when identifying the need for interagency and interregional transportation options.



Iowa Public Transit Association (IPTA)

The mission of the IPTA is to unify, advocate, and advance the interests of Iowa transit systems to influence and gain support from government agencies, legislators, and other entities. IPTA serves as the trade organization of Iowa's 35 public transit agencies, advocating for public transit interests and hosting multiple conferences each year to highlight public transit trends and offer discussion of public transit challenges. During its development, this Plan was presented to the IPTA membership at their regularly scheduled meetings.

Iowa Transportation Coordination Council (ITCC)

Chaired by the Iowa DOT's Modal Transportation Bureau, the ITCC meets bi-monthly to discuss such issues as mobility management, accessibility of transportation, State Transit Assistance (STA) Special Project Proposal applications pertaining to coordination, and the encouragement of state and local agencies' involvement in the passenger transportation planning process. Having grown considerably from the original member state departments, the ITCC now includes membership from state departments, statewide organizations, and federal groups. This Plan was presented to the ITCC representatives at their regularly scheduled meetings throughout its development.

Public Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC)

PTAC members represent Iowa public transit agencies to provide guidance and recommendations to the Iowa DOT Modal Transportation Bureau regarding public transit funding and policy issues. Council membership includes public transit professionals from regional, small urban, and large urban (both under and over 200,000 population) public transit systems.

Make Your Mark!

The Iowa Developmental Disabilities Council (IDDC) hosts an annual conference that seeks to bring Iowans living with disabilities, direct care support professionals, parents and family members, and other disability advocates together to increase civic engagement, advocacy, and leadership skills. In 2024, representatives from the Iowa DOT Systems Planning and Modal Transportation Bureaus attended the conference to obtain direct input from transit users. The input collected from this conference was incorporated into the conclusions of this Plan.

Internal Stakeholders

Representatives from several bureaus within the Iowa DOT were invited to participate in the development of the Plan. The participants were invited due to their relationship to public transit and passenger transportation, such as the Aviation and Rail Transportation Teams. Other bureaus were involved due to their experience with special projects and corridor-level studies that considered aspects of public transit.

Public Input

Published in 2017, the *State Public Participation Process for Transportation Planning* provides guidance for providing lowans the opportunity to help identify transportation issues, needs, and priorities; planning how to meet those needs and priorities; and selecting transportation projects to make those plans a reality. Examples of how the Public Participation Process was utilized in this Plan include the following.

Passenger Transportation Summit

The annual Iowa Passenger Transportation Summit was held at the Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) Ankeny campus. Attendance was an open invite, allowing the members of the public to attend and participate alongside federal, state, and local government officials, public transit agency staff, and human service organizations.

The 2024 summit was one of the first opportunities to announce this update to the Plan. For this summit, a survey was developed that summarized the results of the Iowa Public Transit Needs Survey that was distributed alongside the 2020 plan. This secondary survey gave all attendees a chance to provide their feedback on the previous results and share more details about any new public transit challenges they are experiencing. More information about this process and results can be found in Chapter 3, Needs and Strategies.

Public Surveys

An online public survey was open for input from October 16th, 2024, to February 1st, 2025. The intent of the survey was to provide the public an opportunity to weigh-in on their experiences of public transit and how it can be improved upon.

Website and Media

Iowa DOT's Outreach and Development Bureau created a website for the Plan, press releases, posts on the Iowa DOT's Transportation Matters blog, and posts on the department's social media accounts.

Public Comment Period

A 30-day public comment period was held for this plan from November 1st to December 1st, 2025. During this time, the draft plan was posted online along with contact information and a comment form. All responses and comments from the public surveys, website, social media, and public comment period were compiled and considered while revising the final draft of the Plan.



1.4 How Will This Plan Be Used?

What will the outcome be?

This Plan will assist the department and local public transit agencies in making informed decisions for the state. The strategies within serve as the starting points for what will become the implementation phase of the planning process. Once projects move through the planning process, they can be approved and put into the 5-year program. Figure 1.3 shows the Iowa DOT's planning and programming process workflow.

- **Public Transit Plan:** The Plan serves as a kind of blueprint of strategies to successfully address identified needs and right-size the public transit system for the future. The analyses that contribute to the development of the Plan ensure that the right resources are allocated to the right action at the right time.
- **Implementation:** While the Plan outlines the priority of events and milestones that need to be reached, implementation determines exactly how those strategies and actions will be executed.
- **Performance monitoring:** Once the implementation of this plan begins, then it is important to monitor our performance of the system. This allows the Iowa DOT to determine if changes in public transit performance and any of the factors noted in the initial needs assessment have been impacted by the strategies. The evaluation of the system's performance is continuous, with minor adjustments occurring as the implementation of the Plan continues to help the department ensure that it is making the best investments at the most ideal times.
- **Guidance and input:** Feedback is an important aspect of the planning process as it lets the Iowa DOT know what elements of the Plan are working and what elements may need to be adjusted. Using this feedback, public transit professionals can rapidly respond to changing environments, especially as situations change and technological advancements challenge conventional ideas regarding how public transit can be utilized.

Transit Funding and Programming Process

Public transit planning is a complex and active process to determine the current and future needs for Iowa’s transit system and finding solutions with available resources. The Plan can serve as a resource for transit agencies, offering a template for creating plans tailored to their specific needs or providing a starting point with goals, tools, and resources to support more informed investment.

The Iowa Public Transit Long Range Plan is a mode-specific plan that nests within the State Long Range Transportation Plan—an authoritative document that is approved by the Iowa Transportation Commission and guides all transportation infrastructure investments before they are programmed in the 5-year Iowa Transportation Improvement Program.

System Objectives

In the State Long Range Transportation Plan, the ultimate goal of the Iowa DOT’s objectives is “mobility”, which is further defined through key objectives: safety, sustainability, accessibility, and flow.

Public Transportation efforts deliver on each of the pillars of mobility, so by pursuing these efforts, Public Transportation Planning and this long-range plan align with the overall goals for the department.

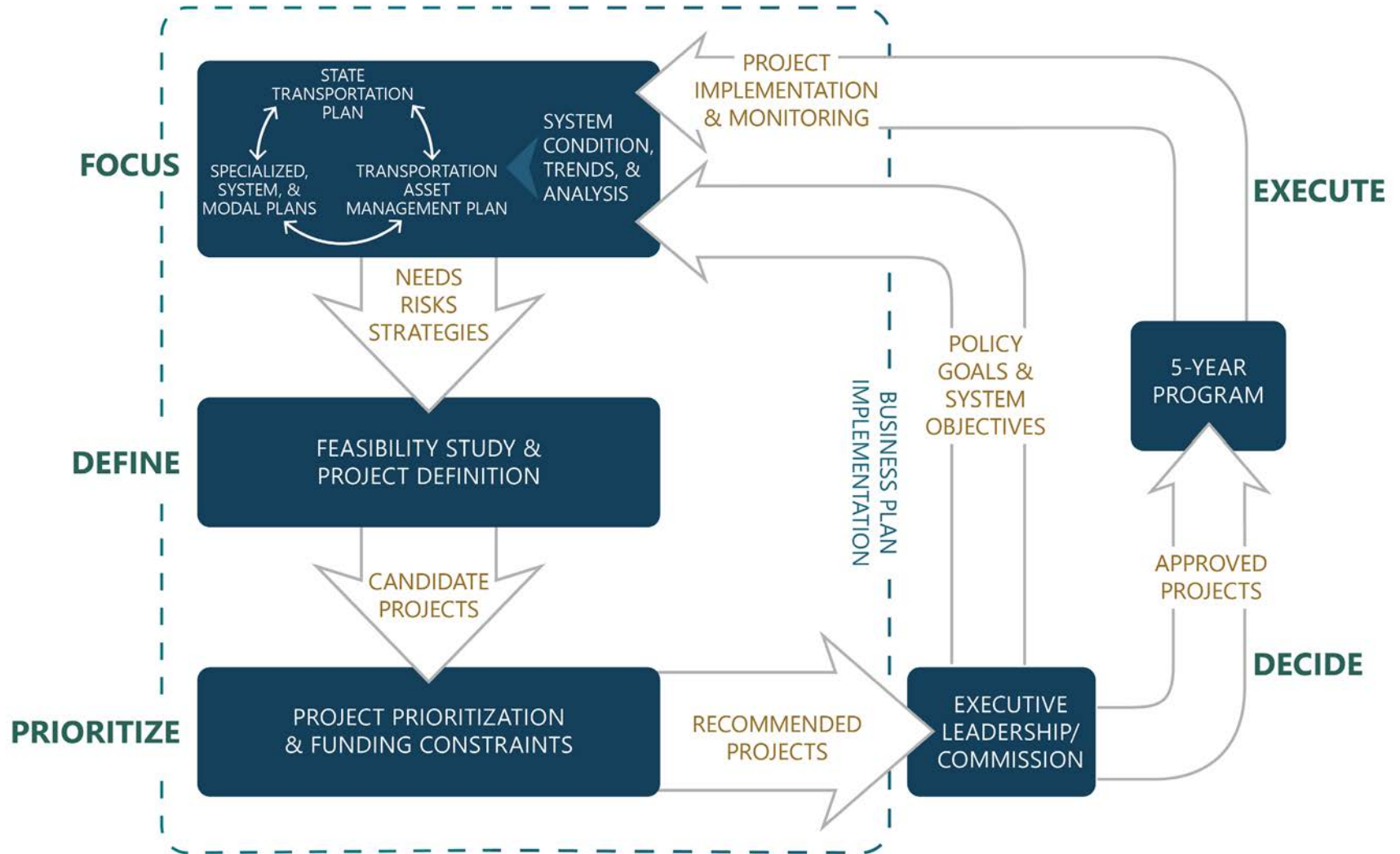
Figure 1.2: Iowa DOT’s system objectives



Source: Iowa DOT State Long Range Transportation Plan



Figure 1.3: Iowa DOT planning and programming process



Source: Iowa DOT State Long Range Transportation Plan