Carrying the Baton: Recommendations for Presidential Transition Teams on Planning for Ongoing Major Investments

AUGUST 22, 2024

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Introduction

The next presidential administration will have the task of managing the implementation of several ongoing major investment initiatives, such as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS and Science Act, which include multi-year funding from Congress and intend to distribute billions of dollars to states, localities, tribes and other organizations. This presents a significant challenge since the next administration will need to take over these programs mid-execution while at the same time set its own priorities for implementation and ensure agencies and the White House are staffed with the expertise needed to carry out those priorities.

These major investments can be complex for the government to manage during the best of times. They involve new program designs, extensive collaboration within and between agencies, different levels of government and the private sector, and require the responsible distribution of significant funding. The work of managing these programs during a change in administrations can create additional complications given that an incoming team may have many competing priorities as well as a short timeframe to prepare for a new term.

Drawing on the work of our Center for Presidential Transition® and ongoing programming providing insights and promising practices for implementation of major investment initiatives, the Partnership for Public Service developed this resource on how transition teams can apply best practices to ensure the next administration is equipped to take over the management of these significant federal investment programs.

About Major Investments

When Congress passes and the president signs major legislation, federal agencies must translate these initiatives into practical action to ensure its goals are realized. The executive branch, following congressional direction, must function effectively to ensure funding is distributed and managed responsibly and that communities, intergovernmental stakeholders, businesses and other organizations benefit from the programs and services created by these investments. Delivering on these promises requires exceptional leadership, effective systems and processes, and strong collaboration with partners inside and outside government. However, federal leaders lack a true roadmap to meet these critical objectives. At the Partnership, we are helping to create this roadmap by developing a new learning system—an ongoing source of knowledge and expertise for implementing large-scale federal investment programs.

Transition Best Practices for Major Investments

SET CLEAR PRIORITIES

Presidential transition teams operate via well-defined work streams to establish agency, personnel and policy priorities and plans for the incoming administration. Because of their significant scope and scale, major investment initiatives require focused attention from transition teams. Transition teams should follow the practices below to ensure there are clear priorities so the new administration is prepared to take over implementation of these significant programs.
For additional resources on setting priorities during the presidential transition period, visit our Presidential Transition Guide (Chapter 4).

Develop a Plan for Major Investments

As transition policy teams develop plans for an incoming administration, which often focus on the first 100 and 200 days of a term, they should include specific plans related to the implementation of ongoing major investment initiatives, including identifying any personnel, legislative, regulatory or budgetary issues that need to be addressed.

An incoming administration may want to continue implementation decisions made by the previous administration or change how certain programs are run to reflect its own policy, agency and personnel priorities. Even before the election, transition teams should be thinking about how ongoing initiatives interact with the candidate's platform and develop plans for how they will approach implementation continuity with that in mind. After the election, these plans should be further developed by incorporating additional specifics gathered by agency transition review teams. Plans should also address how incoming political appointees can collaborate with career staff to build on work that has already been implemented.

In developing plans for policy initiatives, there may be an impulse to dismiss rather than reshape the work of the previous administration, particularly one of a different political party. However, automatically doing so can lead to missed opportunities[1]. The complexity of the current set of major investment programs—with dozens of design choices made for each program and hundreds of programs happening at once—means that simply dismissing the previous work may lead to delays and, in the end, require additional and significant effort. Even if they plan to adjust implementation priorities or policies, transition teams should first use the transition period to understand how major investment implementation is currently being managed, and whether there are successful operational strategies or program design decisions that they would like to carry forward, as well as how they can draw on the experience and expertise of career staff in agencies. After this, decisions to reprioritize, adjust or significantly alter a program may be easier to carry out.

An incoming administration may also be interested in pursuing new large-scale initiatives that they will need to plan for during transition. Preparing for new major investments during the transition period should include extensive planning and consultation with key members of Congress since new initiatives will require legislative approval. For example, during the 2020-2021 transition, Joe Biden's incoming team began planning its approach to infrastructure and clean energy investments, a priority of the president-elect. The work done during this transition eventually informed the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act). The administration was able to quickly get started implementing the law once it was passed because of the preparation work done during the transition.

[1] Center for Presidential Transition, "We've Done this Before: Presidential Transitions During a Time of Crisis," November 2020, p. 3. Retrieved from presidentialtransition.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2020/11/Transition-During-Crisis.pdf.

Take a Cross-Agency View

Historically, federal departments and agencies have been structured to focus on their own specific missions and programs. However, major investments—like many of the challenges our government faces today—are cross-cutting, with multiple agencies working on complementary programs or serving the same communities. Coordination and collaboration between agencies is crucial for the effective implementation of these initiatives. Review teams should identify areas where agencies are already successfully collaborating, the cross-agency forums that support implementation and what challenges currently hinder coordination. These findings can then be applied to plans for supporting what is already working and implementing new solutions to address current challenges.

Determine the Relationship Between the White House and Agencies

Although much of the implementation of major investments rests with agencies, offices within the White House, including key policy councils, play a significant role in setting implementation priorities, coordinating among agencies and approving decisions. In developing plans for ongoing major investments, transition teams should begin laying out a clear strategy for which decisions will be made at the White House level and which will be delegated to agencies. The team also should start to determine review and approval processes for the White House on agency decisions and announcements related to major investments. Determining a clear process during the transition period, particularly if it differs from the outgoing administration's process, will prevent confusion and delays and enable the new administration to move quickly on implementation once the president-elect takes office.

Recommended Actions During Transition

- Develop specific priorities and plans—overall and at the individual program level where possible—for implementation of ongoing major investment initiatives, with a particular focus on the first 100 and 200 days of the next administration. These plans should identify and account for personnel, legislative, regulatory and budgetary impacts.
- Study the implementation choices and processes of the outgoing administration to determine if there are successful strategies that should be carried forward.
- Prepare to collaborate with career staff already in agencies and draw upon their experience and expertise in implementation.
- Plan for any new or supplemental major investment programs that the president-elect is interested in pursuing.
- Prepare to work with Congress on major investments, including existing and potential new initiatives.
- Identify areas of implementation that will require cross-agency collaboration and plan for how to advance that collaboration.
- Determine guidelines for which major investment implementation decisions will be made at the White House and which will rest with agency leadership.
- Design a clear and streamlined process for how offices within the White House will review and approve agency decisions on major investments.

FOCUS ON LEADERSHIP AND STAFFING

One of the primary responsibilities of transition teams is preparing for the more than 4,000 political appointments an incoming administration must make. Having the right teams in place is crucial for a new administration's success, including when it comes to major investments. Transition personnel teams should consider these initiatives and necessary program-specific expertise when developing their strategy and identifying potential appointees to lead key priorities.

For additional resources on political appointments, visit our Presidential Transition Guide (Chapter 3).

Consider Major Investment Needs When Planning Political Appointments

In identifying, recruiting and vetting potential political appointees, transition teams should keep in mind the role that particular positions—both within agencies and in the White House—play in major investment implementation and the skills needed for people in those roles to be successful. For example, the CHIPS and Science Act is designed to spur investment in the domestic production of semiconductors. Transition teams may want to consider appointees who will be able to foster strong working relationships with the semiconductor industry, or who have expertise in implementing programs to build manufacturing capacity, for positions overseeing these programs.

Just as they consider which positions need to be most urgently filled to ensure national security, respond to crisis or shepherd other priorities, transition teams also should consider whether appointments to specific positions with responsibility for implementing major investments should be expedited to ensure that work on those initiatives has timely direction from a senior leader.

Transition teams should not only focus on agency appointments affected by major investments but should make sure that they are anticipating the personnel needs within the White House to support effective cross-agency coordination. Planning for implementation resources needed within the White House during transition can help an incoming administration ensure it will be able to provide timely guidance and assistance to agencies from the beginning.

Identify and Consider Retaining Key Personnel

Transition teams often consider whether to retain some appointees from the incumbent administration, particularly in sensitive national security positions, hard-to-fill jobs and roles such as chief financial officers that require specific management competencies[2]. Similarly, transition teams should identify and consider retaining key leaders who are critical to ongoing major investment implementation to ensure continuity and make use of their expertise.

[2] Center for Presidential Transition, "Presidential Transition Guide," fifth edition, 2023, pg. 95. Retrieved from presidentialtransition.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2023/11/2023-Presidential-Transition-Guide.pdf.

Plan for Any Anticipated Surge Hiring Needs

Major investments—particularly those involving newly created programs—require existing federal agency capacity to be increased quickly to implement these programs. For example, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump administration carried out surge hiring efforts to respond to the health and economic crises and implement major legislation such as the CARES Act.

Agency review teams should take note of current agency workforces and whether any surge hiring efforts will be necessary to achieve the incoming administration's implementation goals—particularly if the administration is considering new major investment legislation—and plan for how incoming agency leaders can work with the Office of Personnel Management, chief human capital officers and HR teams to do so. Transition teams also should create contingency plans for how the administration will pursue major investment implementation if it takes longer than anticipated to staff up.

For additional information on conducting federal surge hiring efforts, including a detailed list of hiring authorities, visit our report, Rapid Reinforcements: Strategies for Federal Surge Hiring.

Recommended Actions During Transition

- Determine what skills are needed to successfully lead major investment implementation—including how those skills may differ from program to program.

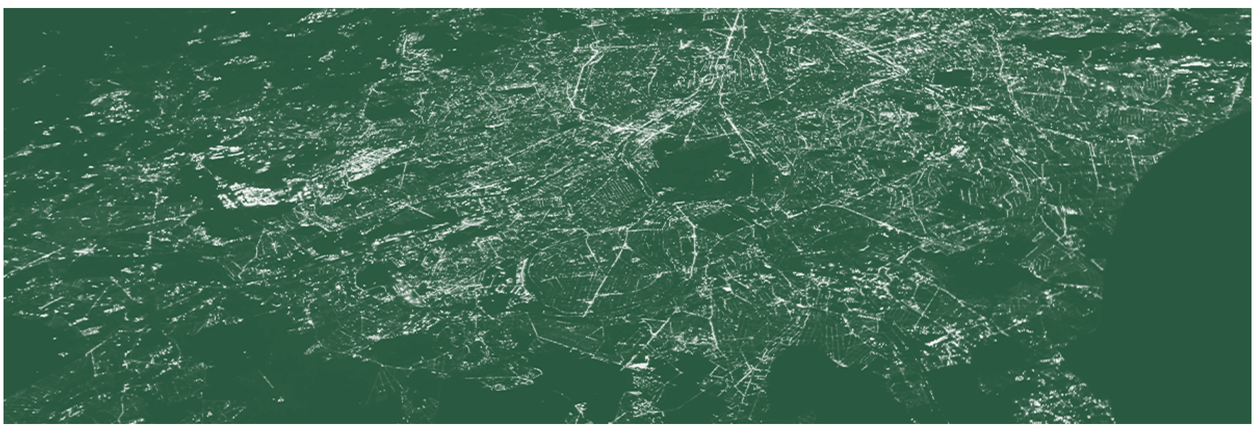
Keep those skills in mind when preparing, identifying and vetting potential political appointees for positions with implementation responsibilities.

- Plan for the capabilities and subject-matter expertise that will be needed for major investment implementation within White House offices. Consider options such as the Act that allow administrations and agencies to bring in subject-matter experts from academic institutions, other levels of government and nonprofit organizations.
- Consider expediting appointments for positions with responsibility for major investment implementation to ensure that the work has direction from a senior leader with the full authority of the incoming administration behind them.
- Identify and consider retaining key leaders who are critical to ongoing implementation to ensure continuity and expertise.
- If considering new major investment legislation, plan for any anticipated surge hiring that would be needed to achieve the incoming administration's major investment goals.

PRIORITIZE INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNICATION

State, local, tribal and territorial government partners are critical in enabling any administration to implement its agenda across priority areas, particularly for major investment programs where the last stage of program delivery is often outside the scope of the federal government. Transition teams must focus on establishing or renewing relationships with intergovernmental stakeholders at all levels to set the stage for constructive partnerships during the administration.

For additional information on how to use the transition period to help establish intergovernmental relationships, visit The States of our Union report from the Center for Presidential Transition.
For more information on intergovernmental coordination related to major investment implementation, see our list of promising practices.



Use the Transition Period to Initiate Relationships and Create Feedback Loops

During the pre-election transition period, transition teams begin developing detailed plans for executing the administration's vision, including ways to inform and engage state, local, tribal and territorial entities. Once the outcome of the election is known, the president-elect and the transition team should begin receiving and conducting outreach with key stakeholders.

Incoming administrations should use this outreach to make connections, begin building trust and gather informal feedback from state and local leaders about how implementation of major investment programs has worked thus far, including successes and remaining challenges that can help inform the new administration's approach. This information can then supplement more formal program feedback data gathered by agencies.

Building these relationships and identifying areas of support during the transition period can help ensure that an administration is ready to hit the ground running on implementation of programs that require significant intergovernmental coordination.

Build an Administration with Intergovernmental Experience

Having personnel with the skills and experience to build successful working relationships with different levels of government is crucial for an incoming administration.

Intergovernmental affairs teams play a crucial role in major investments—sharing the administration's priorities and communicating stakeholder needs back to those charged with implementation. Transition teams should consider major investments when selecting candidates for intergovernmental affairs roles in the White House and in agencies to make sure that the teams have the expertise and diversity of experience necessary to help advance implementation.

Transition teams also should make sure that candidates for positions with responsibility for implementing major investment initiatives bring a mix of federal, state, local, tribal and territorial knowledge to their roles. Selecting candidates with intergovernmental experience will help ensure that knowledge of the needs of different levels of government is incorporated into implementation decisions.

Rely on Trusted Intermediaries

Major investment programs often rely on trusted intermediaries—such as nonprofits, community organizations and intergovernmental associations like the National Governors Association—to help build relationships with stakeholders and share information about investment opportunities such as grants.

Transition teams should use a similar approach, working with state and local associations and other trusted intermediaries to understand how the incoming administration's planned approach to major investments aligns or conflicts with the needs of stakeholders such as state and local governments. These organizations—particularly the "Big 7" organizations representing state and local governments[3]—can also help an incoming administration make connections with intergovernmental partners[4].

[3] The "Big 7" is the group of nonpartisan, nonprofit organizations made up of state and local government officials and includes the National Governors Association, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Council of State Governments, the International City/County Management Association, the National Association of Counties, the National League of Cities, and the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

[4] Chantelle Renn, Sasha Blachman, Valerie Smith Boyd and Sarah Philbrick, "The States of Our Union," September 14, 2023. Retrieved from presidentialtransition.org/reports-publications/the-states-of-our-union/.

Recommended Actions During Transition

- Begin building relationships with intergovernmental stakeholders during the transition period, since support from and collaboration with different levels of government is crucial to major investment implementation.
- Post-election, gather information from governors, mayors and other local leaders on how they view major investment implementation so far—both successes and challenges. Use this information to inform plans for the incoming administration.
- Ensure incoming major intergovernmental affairs teams—within the White House and in agencies—have the skills and expertise necessary to help advance major investments.
- Ensure that those selected for roles involved in major investment implementation have a mix of federal, state, local, tribal and territorial experience and knowledge so that the needs of different levels of government are incorporated into implementation decisions.
- Work with trusted intermediaries—such as the Big 7 group of nonpartisan organizations representing state and local officials—to understand the major investment landscape, gather information on potential reactions to the incoming administration's plans, and build connections.

Conclusion

Among the many priorities and challenges that the next administration will take responsibility for after Inauguration Day 2025 will be the ongoing implementation of several major investment laws such as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS and Science Act. The next administration may also choose to pursue additional major investments through work with Congress. Due to the large scale of these initiatives—which involve hundreds of programs and billions of dollars—transition teams should devote focused attention and apply transition best practices such as setting clear priorities, focusing on leadership and staffing and prioritizing intergovernmental relationships and communication.

Additional Resources

Below are key resources that may be relevant for transition teams as they undertake major investments planning.

- Transition Guide: Our Presidential Transition Guide is a comprehensive guide on the activities required for transition teams.
- Political-Career Collaboration: Successful implementation of any priority in the federal government requires collaboration between political appointees and career civil servants. This resource provides recommendations for political appointees on how to build strong working relationships with career staff.
- Budget: Understanding the federal budget and federal funding mechanisms is crucial for major investments implementation. Visit our resources on the federal budget cycle and federal budget stakeholders.
- Technical Assistance: Many major investment programs involve technical assistance programs that help communities and organizations access and deploy federal funding. We have compiled a list of promising practices in managing and delivering these types of technical assistance programs.

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