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Why Are U.S. Transit Projects So Costly? This Group Is on the Case.

The U.S. is one of the most expensive countries in the world for building transit, according to the Transit Costs Project. A research group at the NYU Marron Institute of Urban Management is working to understand why.

For the last two years, a group of researchers at the New York University Marron Institute of Urban Management has been building a big database of public transit projects around the world. Their goal: To understand what drives the costs of transit projects, what makes some places more expensive than others, and how costs can be brought down.

The Transit Costs Project is led by Eric Goldwyn, an assistant professor and program director in the Transportation and Land Use Program at the NYU Marron Institute, along with research scholars Alon Levy, Elif Ensari, Marco Chitti and a group of international contributors. To date, the group has built a database with details on hundreds of projects, sourced from popular media, trade publications and official plans. And they've begun publishing in-depth case studies on a handful of individual cities, including projects in Boston and New York in the high-cost category, and Stockholm, Italy and Istanbul in the low-cost category, based on additional data gathering and hundreds of interviews.

This month, the Transit Costs Project is planning to publish an overview of its findings. Among them: The United States is the sixth most expensive country in the world when it comes to building rapid rail projects. The reasons why range from the politicization of project management to the expanding role of consultants, the costs of labor, and efforts to limit disruption to normal traffic flow during construction. In this Q&A, Goldwyn speaks with Governing about what makes transit building so expensive in the U.S., and what might be done to improve costs. The conversation has been edited.

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