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Infrastructure Bill Could Influence How States Select Transportation Projects.

Virginia's 'Smart Scale' program offers an example of how a more-calibrated approach can work—and generate controversy

Included in the bipartisan infrastructure bill now before the U.S. House of Representatives are a pair of provisions that could spur states to rethink how they allocate scarce transportation dollars.

One new program would offer \$2 million grants to help planners set up a formal and more open process to determine which projects should get funding. The other gives officials access to new data sources to help set those priorities.

The grants, pushed by Sens. Tom Carper (D., Del.) and Tammy Duckworth (D., Ill.), were modeled on a Virginia program that shows how such a system could work—and how it can generate controversy.

In 2014, Virginia lawmakers on a bipartisan basis changed the way the state's transportation department allocates funds to road, transit and pedestrian projects.

Before, transportation officials would release a list of their top projects and then work their way down as money became available. But they didn't discuss in detail what criteria they used to devise their ranking.

The ranking was closely watched by local officials and residents, anxious to get money for projects such as widening a traffic-choked highway or calming a dangerous intersection.

Many states use a similar process. In some cases the legislature, rather than the department of transportation, determines the list of projects to fund.

Under Virginia's new system, dubbed "Smart Scale," officials score projects based on six criteria. They examine a project's effect on congestion, safety and environmental quality. They also look at how it fits into regional land-use plans and whether it would contribute to local economic development efforts.

Finally, they assess how a project, such as a widened road, would make the region more accessible, defined as whether people would be able to more easily move around their neighborhoods, even if they don't use the road in question.

"It ties the benefits to people rather than to how well an individual road is performing," said Chris McCahill, director of the State Smart Transportation Initiative, a research group at the University of Wisconsin that helped Virginia set up its program.

Academics have focused on such accessibility measures for decades. But only in the past few years have planners begun to incorporate them into transportation decisions, in part because they can get much more detailed data now than in the past, said Andrew Owen, a research fellow at the Center

for Transportation Studies at the University of Minnesota.

For instance, planners can now map out how long it takes for people on every block to get to destinations such as jobs, grocery stores, schools or doctors' offices and estimate how those travel times would change under different scenarios.

Focusing on those details could change how planners invest their money, said Mr. Owen.

"One of things that we might see is more attention being paid to projects that are smaller-scale but that have an outsized impact on people's ability to get to destinations," he said.

A provision in the infrastructure bill would make that data more widely available.

Virginia officials publish a project's scores on all the criteria, and weigh the results against the costs. They then recommend the top projects for funding from the state's transportation board. The board can adopt or reject the agency's recommendations.

"In the past there was a sense the process was opaque," said Nick Donohue, Virginia's deputy transportation secretary. "Now we have a much more transparent and accountable process. I would like to think that we're picking much more effective projects."

But Virginia's effort has its critics. For instance, a \$115.5 million request to widen the northbound lanes of Interstate 95 over the Rappahannock River didn't score high enough to receive money through the program, even though widening the southbound lanes was approved under the program. That upset local officials who say that stretch of highway is among the state's most congested.

Matthew Kelly, a city council member in nearby Fredericksburg, said that although he agrees with the principle behind Virginia's Smart Scale program, he has problems with its execution.

"It's the metrics that they use to determine what gets funded that creates a problem," he said. "Everybody would agree we are the most screwed-up section of 95 in the freaking world."

The project eventually received funding through other sources.

Dave LaRock, a Republican who represents Loudoun County in the Virginia House of Delegates, said the department of transportation's criteria put too little emphasis on reducing congestion, which he called "the most fundamental need for roads."

Mr. LaRock has introduced legislation to overhaul Smart Scale, so far without success.

Other states, such as North Carolina and Utah, have similar processes in place. In Utah, planners evaluate how projects will affect safety, economic growth, air quality, the possibility of walking or biking and whether the project would fit into the existing community, said Carlos Braceras, executive director of the Utah Department of Transportation.

"When I started here in 1986 the attitude was we're the experts, get out of the way," Mr. Braceras said. "The focus on transparency, on being clear how and why decisions are made, I don't think was as big a focus."

Asking transportation officials to publicly spell out their priorities is a significant shift, said Mr. McCahill. "You've got to change the way you've been doing things and commit to some level of staffing to get it right," he said. "The pilot program in the bill would enable a lot more folks to take that step."

Mr. Braceras said the grants included in the infrastructure bill could help states overcome the fear of trying something new.

“There’s so much risk,” he said. “If it’s done in partnership with the federal government and it’s done with a pilot [program], it gives you a lot of cover.”

The Wall Street Journal

By David Harrison

Sept. 4, 2021

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