

NEW URBAN NEWS

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TIGER grants highlight new transportation paradigm

Less money for highways, more for transit and “complete streets” in \$1.5 billion in grants.

The US Department of Transportation (DOT) took its first steps in early 2010 toward what may be a new approach to funding projects — one that focuses more on multimodal solutions and economic development than on highways and automobile congestion mitigation.

Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood has been talking about “livability” — designing places and transportation systems for transit and walking as well as for car travel. In January he announced that economic development, environmental benefits, and other livability criteria would factor into DOT funding along with the traditional yardsticks of cost and congestion.

DOT showed its seriousness about these goals in late February by awarding \$1.5 billion in Transportation Investments Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grants, part of the 2009 stimulus bill. A portion of the Tiger funds went to highways — but to a lesser degree than had been typical in the past. Streetcars, pedestrian/bicycle paths, multimodal transit centers, and transformation of automobile-oriented arterials into “complete streets” also received TIGER money.

The grants provided key funding for a handful of projects that involve new urbanists — including streetcar lines in Tucson, Arizona, and Dallas, Texas, and a multimodal facility in Normal, Illinois. The TIGER program is small relative to overall US transportation spending. The most recent five-year surface transportation authorization amounted to \$244 billion, of which about 79 percent went to highways. The breakdown for TIGER was far different: 23 percent highways, 26 percent transit, 25 percent freight rail, 7 percent port, and 19 percent multimodal/other.

More urban, less rural

In the online *New Republic*, Robert Puentes of the Brookings Institution reported that “metropolitan areas are ... where 72 percent of the seaport tonnage arrives and departs; where 78 percent of our interstate miles are travelled; where 92 percent of air passengers and transit miles are ridden, and where 93 percent of rail passengers board.” Yet only 59 percent of surface transportation dollars flow to metro areas.

The TIGER grants represent a significant change. “Over 80 percent of the projects and 70 percent of total TIGER funding is targeted to the 100 largest metro areas,” said Puentes. “That’s not just the super-large places like New York and Chicago, but also important metros like Louisville, Tulsa, and Providence.”

The grants were competitive — prompting applications that would have totaled \$60 billion if every request had won approval. By allowing local jurisdictions to apply directly, the TIGER process broke the stranglehold of state departments of transportation on surface transportation funds, according to David Goldberg, communications director for Transportation for America. With 53 percent of the money going to municipalities, municipal planning organizations (MPOs), and other entities, “this opens up a greater range of possibilities,” he said. “I would venture to say it is unprecedented.”

Even the 23 percent slice of funding for highways includes out-of-the-ordinary projects. One example is \$5.6 million for a “complete streets” development in Dubuque, Iowa. The project “revitalizes a critical area of downtown Dubuque, the Millwork District, by creating walkable and transit-friendly streets,” DOT says. It will implement “land use and transportation policies that encourage sustainable economic development.” In other words, it’s targeted at smart growth redevelopment.

In Dallas, planning consultant Scott Polikov, a Congress for the New Urbanism board member, worked with the MPO and a citizens’ group on a TIGER application that garnered \$23 million. The key to the project was economic development, Polikov said. The Downtown Dallas Streetcar links working class neighborhoods to downtown — the region’s largest employment center. The approximately 5-mile streetcar loop also connects to Union Station, with its links to commuter rail between the downtowns of Dallas and Fort Worth and the regional Dallas Area Rapid Transit system. The streetcar line will generate significant urban development, Polikov contended. Other recent streetcar lines have resulted in huge private investments — in Tampa, Florida, adjacent development has topped a billion dollars and in Portland, Oregon, several billion dollars — and hence were singled out by DOT for funding.

The Tucson Modern Streetcar, at \$63 million, received one of the largest TIGER grants. The streetcar line was envisioned as part of the redevelopment of the Mission District, previously known as the Mercado District at Menlo Park, which won a 2006 CNU Charter Award for Moule & Polyzoides of Pasadena, California. Based on the historic development patterns of Tucson’s Barrio Viejo, the development includes a series of regionally inspired buildings, public plazas, streets, and neighborhoods, some of which are already completed and in use. The Mission District’s three-block main street will be on the 4-mile-long streetcar loop, which will go through downtown and connect to other neighborhoods and the University of Arizona campus.

Breaking down silos

Transportation funding has typically been funneled through “silos,” or specific modes of transportation — e.g., highways or transit. Multimodal projects — those that enable many modes — gain support less easily. The TIGER program, on the other hand, awarded more than \$200 million to projects labeled or described as “multimodal.”



The downtown Saint Paul Union Depot multimodal hub will combine intercity bus and rail systems, and pedestrian and bicycle access. Rendering courtesy of Ramsey County
For example, a \$22 million grant will support a transportation center in downtown Normal, Illinois, that will bring together Amtrak, intercity bus lines, local transit, cars, shuttles, taxis,

bicycles, and pedestrians. The transportation center is the centerpiece of a LEED-ND certified downtown revitalization plan by Farr Associates of Chicago.

Another example is the refurbishment and reuse of the beautiful early-1920s Union Depot in downtown Saint Paul, Minnesota. The \$35 million grant will help merge Amtrak, intercity bus, local bus, light rail, taxis, and bicycle accommodations in the historic, Classical building (see rendering, above right).

Transportation and land use reformers in DC view TIGER grant selections positively, Goldberg said. He pointed out some projects that would likely have never received DOT funding under previous criteria. One is a 150-block “Green Impact Zone” in Kansas City, Missouri, where transit will be part of an effort to jumpstart economic recovery in a high-poverty area. “The Kansas City project pulls clean transportation into an overall vision of revitalization that is very interesting and exciting,” Goldberg said. He added that “against all odds a couple of bicycle and pedestrian networks cleared the bar, in Indianapolis and the Philadelphia region.”

However, the funding is clearly inadequate so far, according to Goldberg. Transportation for America is lobbying for another \$5 billion for merit-based TIGER grants in a second jobs bill. “We’d also like to see something like this a major feature of the next transport reauthorization,” he added.

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