

POLITICO

Two tales about TIGER grants



By [JESSICA MEYERS](#) and [JONATHAN ALLEN](#) | 8/1/12 11:29 PM EDT

TIGER grants launched with a roar three years ago, heralded as a clever way to dole out money to states and cities with innovative infrastructure plans.

But now, the program, which delivered \$3.1 billion nationwide in four rounds of funding, has hit a turning point. Republicans want to kill the grants, which they say have been overly politicized by the Obama administration. The House voted to nix future funding earlier this year. And a six-month extension of current spending laws means it won't become clear until after the election whether TIGER will survive.

The idea was novel when the Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery grants came about: Competition would ensure the most beneficial transportation projects won.

But someone still has to pick the winners.

And the way applications moved through the Department of Transportation appeared less transparent than many in Washington wanted, with critics saying the process — intended as an upgrade from lawmakers' backroom decisions — has not gotten much better.

The outcry they have spurred exemplifies the challenges of substituting earmarks for objectives and formulas for merit.

"They do them behind closed doors," House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman John Mica told POLITICO. He has labeled the grants "executive earmarks" and opposes any future money for them.

His home state of Florida has been on the receiving end of only \$84.4 million and didn't get any funding in the first round. Mica said he has no doubt the grants are politicized. "That's another thing we have to look at," he said, "because people are asking for another round. Oh God."

Another GOP office sent POLITICO a spreadsheet of projects from the second round of TIGER grants that shows an uneven distribution of money to Democratic-held districts and politically competitive swing districts.

In some ways, that's not surprising: Most of the country's transportation needs center in heavily populated areas, and Democrats tend to dominate big-city politics.

The transportation secretary must sign off on the grants, but the final decisions get little public scrutiny. And the criteria, which include a cost-benefit analysis, delve into the less quantifiable aspects of livability and sustainability.

"What we've tried to do is be as transparent as possible," Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood told POLITICO when the 2012 grants were awarded in June. "And the way that we do that is we make available to grantees who weren't

awarded money an opportunity to have staff talk about what we felt were deficiencies in their applications. And in many instances, most applications were pretty good, but we don't have enough money."

But the fuzzy process makes it look like some states — and cities — benefit more.

Illinois, for instance, stood out in a POLITICO analysis of the 219 grants handed out under the TIGER program. Its \$225.5 million haul over four waves of grant awards ranked a close second to California, which is the nation's most populous state. It should be noted that half of the funding for Illinois went to Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency Project freight rail, which will help with congestion in the country's busiest rail hub.

The Illinois take includes two projects that aid Peoria, LaHood's hometown.

The little city famous for epitomizing middle America stands to benefit from \$30 million in TIGER grants, or nearly 1 percent of the \$3.1 billion distributed nationwide since the program launched as part of the 2009 stimulus law.

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