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Proposal: Are Competitive Grants a Model for Saving US Transportation Policy?

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The biggest obstacle to getting funding for transportation infrastructure is that the federal transportation program is almost invisible to the people upon whom it depends — its customers, the taxpayers.

Last month, the Census Bureau reported that over 85 percent of Americans live in the cities, towns, and suburbs that make up our metropolitan areas large and small. Those regions generate more than 90 percent of the nation's gross domestic product, according to the Brookings Institution.

At the moment, though, these centers of our economy have access to only a fraction of the money they pay into the nation's transportation program. What would they do with the money if they had access to more of it? We have had a chance to see over the last five years with the TIGER program.

All of the winners of competitive TIGER grants solved multiple problems at once, and almost none would have been funded under existing silos. The big lesson: Competition spurs innovation that formula funds never ever will.

By opening a door for local elected officials, civic groups, institutions, and employers to engage for the economic benefit of their community, competitive grants have connected the federal program to paying customers like never before.

The next transportation bill should build on this success, and shift some of the emphasis to funding projects that local communities have determined are most economically beneficial. In doing so, Congress will build an enduring constituency for a program that can deliver far more effective results — now and far into the future.

(more on how serving local priorities can save U.S. transportation policy . . .)

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