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By TOM BENNING
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Dallas area whiffs in latest round of federal road and rail grants

North Texas has missed out on a group of federal transportation grants, causing planners to re-evaluate financing and design on several local projects.

The whiff in chasing the highly competitive grants — announced last month by the U.S. Department of Transportation — isn't likely to derail any major efforts in the works, officials said.

But it probably puts the kibosh on a few wish-list proposals, such as Dallas Area Rapid Transit's plans for powered track-switching improvements in its replacement of rail through downtown Dallas.

And it's forcing creative financing on other projects, such as the S.M. Wright Freeway overhaul that needs an extra \$20 million to allay South Dallas residents' concerns about access to neighborhoods.

"It is what it is," said Michael Morris, transportation director at the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

The Dallas-Fort Worth area has had some past success in winning federal grants from the Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery program.

The Dallas streetcar project to Oak Cliff was awarded \$23 million in 2009, the year the TIGER program began. The Bush Turnpike's western extension got \$20 million that year. DART got \$5 million in 2011 for its Orange Line expansion.

But North Texas has struck out in the last couple of years, leaving some projects in a lurch.

Morris, who helps coordinate many of the grant applications, said he didn't doubt that the region's proposals were "analytically reviewed." But he said it was possible that politics played a role, too.

Now that Congress has eschewed earmarks — long a way for lawmakers to bring federal dollars back home — grant programs have come under pressure. The TIGER program is the product of a Democratic administration, and North Texas has only two Democratic lawmakers.

So Morris said simple math may have been stacked against the region when it came to doling out \$454 million in TIGER money this year to 52 projects.

"We'll just have to keep working hard," he said.

The S.M. Wright Freeway redo had perhaps the most at stake among the latest set of applications.

The southern Dallas project, set to begin construction late next year, will eliminate an ugly elevated freeway and replace it with a landscaped boulevard. It will also fix the poorly designed interchange known as Dead Man's Curve.

Late in the planning process, residents noticed that the project would eliminate a northbound exit off Interstate 45. So with the help of Dallas City Council member Carolyn Davis, the Texas Department of Transportation worked out a solution to improve access.

And that meant the price tag jumped from \$150 million to \$170 million.

Morris said he thought S.M. Wright was a "shoo-in" for TIGER money, given its potential to improve a neighborhood. But even after missing out, he didn't hesitate in guaranteeing that the extra \$20 million would be found.

To allow more time to determine that funding source, Morris said, \$20 million will be “borrowed” from the second stage of the project and applied to the first.

Then planners will look at an unused regional pool of federal money to fill out the balance. Or if voters next year approve a plan to infuse TxDOT with an additional \$1.2 billion a year, some of that could be applied toward S.M. Wright.

But the failed TIGER grant bids affect other North Texas projects, too.

A proposed Dallas streetcar extension through downtown, for instance, will return to the list of unfunded dreams. The same goes for improvement of the interchange between LBJ Freeway and Skillman Street in northeastern Dallas.

DART’s main \$50 million rail replacement project through downtown Dallas won’t be affected. But DART lost out on a \$16 million grant that would have allowed it to add spots downtown where trains could be switched from one side of the tracks to the other.

DART could look at alternative plans, such as non-powered track crossovers, which would still help the agency deal with downtown blockages.

But without the federal funding, DART spokesman Morgan Lyons said, “it’s not likely going to happen.”