

Title: Connecting America: A National Access Program for Smaller Cities and Rural Areas

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Executive Summary

Small cities and rural communities focus on providing a basic level of transportation. A new *Connecting America* program has been proposed to support transportation in these less populated areas. Recommended options include using population to determine the need for public transportation; continuing local planning requirements; and requiring the states set performance measures and standards. Many details are still being developed including how planning would be supported. However, Washington is in many cases exceeding what the suggested options imply, and is well prepared to implement any of them.

Background

In many small cities and rural communities, “the need” is that of basic transportation services. Rather than reducing congestion, the goal is to provide reliable and efficient routes for businesses and the public. Businesses and people need reliable roadways in order to support local growth. In the case of public transportation, the goal is to provide a lifeline for citizens to get to jobs, medical appointments, social service programs, and maintain their independence. Public transportation projects include vanpools, demand response services for the elderly and people with disabilities, and fixed route services. The services are supported with a mix of local, state, and federal funds.

Federal and State programs require cities, counties, transits and MPO/RTPOs to plan as a condition of receiving funding. The same programs partially support the planning efforts. However, there is always a strain on the smaller entities to accomplish the required planning.

The National Surface Transportation and Revenue Study Commission has concluded that *Connecting America* with access to essential services remains an important role for the federal government. This rural and small city focus is a complimentary position to their support for congestion relief in large urban areas. The *Connecting America* program would continue (in a different structure) funding for public transportation along with the planning requirements. The federal government would fund projects at an 80/20 federal/state match rate.

Suggested Options

- 1. The USDOT in cooperation with public and private stakeholders should develop population thresholds that would be suitable for various forms of public transportation.** This is similar to the philosophy behind funding levels that the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) currently uses for many of their programs. The proposal implies that rural and small urban populations are an effective way of determining if there is a public transportation need in a region. Other possibilities include balancing population data with density and per capita

information. For example, an area with low density and a high percentage of older adults may have a higher need for public transportation than an area that simply has a high population.

Pro – The system is easy to understand and can be evenly applied. Washington has a long history working with public transportation funding based on population.

Con – Formulas based solely on population tend to oversimplify the need for public transportation. A large population does not necessarily equal a large unmet need.

- 2. Metropolitan Planning Organizations should continue planning for public transportation in smaller areas.** All MPOs currently plan for public transportation based on state and federal requirements. *Smaller areas* refer to MPOs that cover populations of 50,000 – 200,000. Currently, all projects funded through WSDOT’s public transportation consolidated grant program are derived from the MPO/RTPO’s Public Transit Human Service Transportation Plans. WSDOT and the MPO/RTPOs already extend the planning requirement to regions under 50,000 where no MPO exist, and therefore beyond what the option suggests. The plans have an extensive rider and social service outreach component that ensures people without their own transportation have their needs represented in the planning process. Additionally, other social service transportation options are coordinated with WSDOT and USDOT funded transportation programs.

Pro – By continuing to plan for public transportation in rural and small urban areas, those areas will be better prepared to provide basic level access to their residents.

Con – Placing planning requirements on rural areas often means placing requirements in areas with little resources for planning. Support for planning could offset this concern.

- 3. Washington should develop state specific performance standards and measures and develop plans to meet these objectives in an economically justified manner.** Much like with *Metropolitan Mobility*, a crucial piece of the *Connecting America* proposal focuses on the development of performance standards. The proposal focuses on population thresholds for various forms of public transportation, standardized measures of access for multiple uses and modes, and national accessibility goals. This is specifically defined as to apply beyond the small metropolitan areas that have already been complying with planning requirements. The RTPO structure under state law already places Washington in a prime position to be able to respond in such an environment.

Pro - Much as the requirements for coordinated human service planning have brought certain elements of transportation into a broader mix, the proposal fits with WSDOT's direction for true needs-based multi-modal planning. This also creates a data backed narrative for supporting services in rural areas.

Con - It is unclear what the appropriate performance standards will be. In addition, data collection absorbs resources that are often in short supply in rural areas.