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Is Illinois road funding split fair — or ‘arbitrary’?

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Would allocating road funds based on criteria like gridlock end "arbitrary" transportation funding decisions in Illinois? CMAP thinks so.

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By Marni Pyke

Performance-based funding for transportation. It's a wonky title for an idea that could transform how we allocate money for road projects in Illinois.

"We spend a lot of money on transportation, yet we still don't have enough," Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning Executive Director Randy Blankenhorn says. "That means we need to think about priorities."

A D V E R T

A deal hammered out by the state's top politicians in the 1980s means that 45 percent of all transportation revenues go to the Chicago metropolitan area and 55 percent is allocated to downstate Illinois.

CMAP wants to change the status quo with a performance-based system using population, congestion, pollution and economic impact as criteria when it comes to doling out dollars for significant projects such as new highways, bridges and interchanges or additional lanes.

"We want to look at how the state can satisfy its needs without an arbitrary

Voting yes for transit

Trains and buses can reduce traffic gridlock and maybe partisan gridlock, too. The first Congressional Public Transportation Caucus formed last week and will be a bipartisan advocacy group for transit. Co-founder Dan Lipinski, a Western Springs Democrat, said the caucus will play a role in pushing for greater attention to public transit as funding decreases.

formula that says you're only going to get so much in a given year," Blankenhorn said. "We think it's arbitrary — some years it's unfair and other years, it's not."

In other words, eliminate the 45/55 split and replace it with "an evaluation of all projects on their merits versus their location in the state," planner Alex Beata said.

Along with major projects, CMAP also wants to introduce a merit-based funding system for expansions of existing roads.

This would include intersection and safety improvements, widening, and grade separations and interconnecting traffic signals. Criteria for choosing these projects would include lane widths, turning radii, congestion relief, crash

statistics and pollution reduction.

The formula reforms would not affect routine maintenance like resurfacing.

"Those aren't political decisions," Blankenhorn said.

The proposal available on [CMAP's website](#) also calls for more public involvement and transparency.

CMAP is the chief planning agency for the region, but that doesn't mean certain state decisions are crystal clear, Blankenhorn said.

"How do they make the decision about whether to expand Palatine Road versus the Route 53 portion in DuPage County?" he asked.

If the state changes the formula — and that's a big if — it will likely mean more funding for the region some years and certainly not less, Blankenhorn said.

The agency points out that the metropolitan region comprises 65 percent of the population and contributes about 70 percent of the state's income tax and 65 percent of its sales tax revenues.

Yet, in IDOT's 2014-2019 multimodal transportation improvement program, about \$3.1 billion — or 45 percent — out of \$6.9 billion goes to District 1 including Cook, DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry and Will counties, CMAP planners said.

So, will downstate lawmakers embrace performance-based funding for transportation? Not so much.

"It's a very bad idea," said Republican Rep. Dwight Kay of Glen Carbon. "The needs of southern Illinois in terms of total miles is far greater than in the suburbs or in Chicago. I would be somewhat dismayed if not shocked to think anyone would propose changes. We have hundreds of bridges that either need to be replaced or are older and in disrepair."

Republican Sen. Sam McCann of Carlinville added that "I think it's another attempt on CMAP's part to divert transportation dollars to Chicago from downstate. Our population density is not as high per square mile but each person is equal in this state. We have a lot of highways and a lot of needs."

Republican Rep. David Reis of Olney thinks the "reason 45 percent doesn't go as far anymore is because they diverted road funds to pay for new programs ... it dates back to the (Rod) Blagojevich years."

And for the record, Illinois Department of Transportation spokeswoman Jae Miller said the agency is not arbitrary but uses data such as road condition, traffic volume, accident history, public input and functional importance of the road when allocating funding.

This week, CMAP intends to start reaching out to lawmakers with letters and phone calls.

Blankenhorn said he hopes for a "rational discussion. It's not about getting more or getting less. It's about the fact this 45 percent constricts the way we manage our investment. When they did the Dan Ryan Expressway that was the only project we had in the entire region — is that the way we want to manage our system?"

"We're not trying to hurt downstate, we know they have needs too."

It won't happen overnight but now's the time to start talking, planners said, before work starts on the next capital bill, which could begin in 2014.

"We can only do this when there are new revenues," Blankenhorn said.

What do you think? Drop me a line at mpyke@dailyherald.com www.cmap.illinois.gov/web/performance-based-funding/;[URL].

Your voice

Scott Brissey of Lake Villa Township shared some memories evoked by last week's column about Amtrak.

"I went to Iowa Wesleyan College in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, in the late '60s," he wrote. "The California Zephyr and the Nebraska Zephyr stopped in Mount Pleasant. I lived in Chicago, but I took the Zephyrs most trips.

"Half of our students were from the East Coast, where there were not enough colleges to take them. Flying to Chicago was easy, but there were only two ways to go the last 400 miles to Mount Pleasant: I-80 to Iowa City, then 50 miles on two-lane State Route 218. At road level, the scenery looked flat.

"Or, take the California Zephyr or the Nebraska Zephyr, where you could stretch your feet, take a walk down the aisles or see panoramas of fields and villages from the second-level observation domes. When stewardesses — 'Zephyrettes' — were added, these trains excelled ... in service and comfort. My fiancée (with her beautiful Boston accent) and I could recline in our seats, knowing that the Zephyrettes would wake us up at our stop.

"Our class reunions are now in the age when government is run like a business. Train service to small towns, and Zephyrettes, are not cost-effective.

"Thirty miles down the line was Fairfield, Iowa, with Parsons College. When the Fairfield station was closed, Parsons College went under and was later bought by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. So far, Mount Pleasant has escaped the ax. I miss the days when government was a public service, not a business."

Gridlock alert

Watch out for overnight lane closures on I-290/Route 53 between Thorndale Avenue and Rand Road starting Tuesday as IDOT crews replace overhead signs. The fun should last until June 20.

Incoming

Gear heads and tree-huggers alike can learn at the Chicago Area Clean Cities' latest Electric Vehicle Forum starting at 9 a.m. Wednesday, June 5, at Harper College in Palatine. To register, go to [\[URL\]www.driveelectricillinois.org](http://www.driveelectricillinois.org/);[URL].[\[/URL\]](#)