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Moving from planning to action: Exploring best practice policy in the finance of local bicycling and pedestrian improvements

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ABSTRACT

In the face of diminished federal and state transportation funding, cities continue to look for creative local funding mechanisms to pay for and implement their multi-modal goals. To understand the types of local funding being used, this study analyzes case study cities across the U.S. to identify best practices, documenting the most widely used methods of funding. We find that county sales tax measures are most common but that additional popular approaches are bond issues, general fund allocations, and transportation impact fees, especially for larger cities. More-so, all of the cities evaluated have both bicycle and pedestrian masterplans to guide infrastructure investments and most pursue more than one local funding source to fund projects. This provides important lessons to communities that desire to improve the local bicycle and pedestrian amenities – the best practice to move from policy to action. © 2016 World Conference on Transport Research Society. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

As many international planning and design policies transition to focus on livability, many cities have begun to shift their design and engineering standards to support multi-modal streetscapes. However, many such cities face funding shortfalls due to a variety of factors. As a result, local communities are often left to compete with one another for available national or regional funding. As such sources become less abundant, communities need alternative approaches to finance bicycle and pedestrian projects in a way that allow for them to be implemented in a reasonable timeframe.

This study analyzes best practice in the US, evaluating cities that seem to be best turning bicycle and pedestrian policy in to infrastructure—with the hypothesis that local self-help funding and property tax measures are becoming increasingly important in operationalizing bicycle and pedestrian plans. This is based on literature that points to a ‘quiet revolution’ in the local funding of such efforts, and how they may be increasing the number of bicycle and pedestrian projects that are implemented (Goldman and Wachs, 2003).

We use a qualitative approach that takes on a thorough review of funding sources, funding dollar amounts, community census

data, bicycle and/or pedestrian master plans, project implementation framework, and responsible staff from the list of top-ranking bicycle and pedestrian friendly cities. Using these cities as case studies, this examination attempts to analyze how different types of communities are funding bicycle and pedestrian improvements. Based on this evaluation lessons are derived to evaluate how leaders can make their cities more safe and accessible for bicyclists and pedestrians.

2. Background

Before evaluating case studies, we survey the literature on transportation finance in the context of changing street standards from more traditional transportation design (Southworth and Ben-Joseph, 1995) to those that support active transportation (Handy et al., 2005; Saelens et al., 2003) and safety for cyclists and pedestrians – methods to design streets to avoid delay for all users (Dowling et al., 2008; Elias, 2011). This is framed not only by the proposition that funneling federal funding to regions can boost the number of bicycle-related projects (Cradock et al., 2009; Handy and McCann, 2010) but by a lack of reduction in gas tax in most locations, which “provides insufficient funds to cover current transportation spending (Laing, 2013).” With less gas tax money available to pay for projects, and with constitutional restrictions in some states on the allocation of that money, local communities face stiffer competition when competing with one another for

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available state dollars to fund bicycle and streetscape infrastructure, and even those such as San Francisco, which has a sales tax measure, have reported gaps in funding (Coté, 2013). With crumbling public infrastructure, communities look to alternate sources to find the money necessary to fund the implementation of planned alternative infrastructure.

2.1. US federal funding

The surface transportation system in the United States is funded by a transportation bill that distributes billions of dollars annually to states for capital improvements and maintenance for roads, transit, and bicycle and pedestrian facilities (de Zeeuw and Flusche, 2011). The current bill that funds surface transportation is the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21), which was signed into law by President Obama on July 6, 2012. MAP-21 supplies approximately \$105 billion in funding for surface transportation for fiscal year (FY) 2012 and FY 2013, and is the first long-term highway authorization enacted since 2005 (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2013).

Federal funding is allocated to bicycle and pedestrian related projects through key federal programs: the Surface Transportation Program (STP), the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Program (CMAQ), the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP), and the Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP). While each program has different stipulations, each also has the capacity to allow for funding of bicycle, pedestrian and streetscape projects. Federal funds are distributed regionally through Metropolitan Planning Organizations.

STP funding can be used by states and localities on projects that preserve and improve the conditions and performance for pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure. 50% of the funds are required to be distributed to areas based on population: urbanized areas with population greater than 200,000, areas with population greater than 5000 but no more than 200,000, areas with population of 5000 or less. The remaining 50% can be used in any area of the state (Surface Transportation Program, 2013). Eligible projects can include: bicycle transportation and pedestrian walkways and ADA sidewalk modification, transportation alternatives, and recreational trails projects.

CMAQ was initially created by the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) of 1991, and has been reauthorized in all subsequent surface transportation acts, including MAP-21 (Federal Highway Administration, 2013). Previous surface transportation act “funding apportionments for each state were calculated based on a formula for weighted populations” in areas that have excessive ozone and carbon monoxide (CO), and are considered areas that either do not meet clean air standards (nonattainment) or have not met clean air standards in the past (maintenance areas) under the Clean Air Act. Under MAP-21, funding apportionments are no longer calculated based on a formula. However states are expected to utilize the equivalent of 25% of their funding to target fine particle particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) reductions in their nonattainment or maintenance areas.

Additionally, FY 2013 and FY 2014 funding is based on FY 2009 funding, which utilized the formula for weighted populations. As a result, each state continues to receive minimum funding allocations based on those FY 2009 apportionments. With MAP-21, states also have increased spending flexibility. With the exception of the 25% set aside for PM_{2.5} nonattainment or maintenance, a state has the flexibility to spend the CMAQ funding on any project that meets basic criteria. CMAQ apportionments can be used to fund “new or expanded transportation projects that reduce emissions”. As a result, this funding program allows flexibility in the types of capital projects to be funded. In addition to other types of projects, CMAQ can fund travel demand management strategies, traffic

flow/management improvements, and bicycle and pedestrian facilities (Sacramento County Department of Transportation, 2013).

TAP funding is new as of FY 2013, and consolidates previous funding from pre-MAP-21 programs including Transportation Enhancements, Recreational Trails, Safe Routes to School, and several other discretionary programs, wrapping them into a single funding source. It allocates 2% of the total amount authorized from the Highway Account of the Highway Trust Fund for federal highways each fiscal year (Federal Highway Administration, 2013). A state may transfer up to 50% of TAP funds for use statewide to the National Highway Performance Program (NHPP), STP, HSIP, CMAQ, and/or Metropolitan Planning. Projects or activities can qualify for TAP funding if they are related to surface transportation and a described transportation alternative; recreational trail program; safe routes to school program; or the plan, design or construction of roadways in the right-of-way of former interstate system routes or divided highways. As described by Title 23, United States Code, 2012, these types of projects or activities can involve the following:

- Construction, planning, and design of on-road and off-road trail facilities for pedestrians, bicyclists, and other non-motorized forms of transportation.
- Construction, planning, and design of infrastructure-related projects and systems that will provide safe routes for non-drivers, including children, older adults, and individuals with disabilities to access daily needs.
- Conversion and use of abandoned railroad corridors for trails for pedestrians, bicyclists, or other non-motorized transportation users.

HSIP replaced STP Safety in FY 2006 and can be used for non-infrastructure safety improvement programs. This funding can be used to improve bicycle and pedestrian facilities when they are tied to a candidate project that intends to correct or improve a hazardous road location or feature, or address a highway safety problem. The candidate project must provide documentation in the “form of crash experience, crash potential, crash rate or other data-supported means” (Federal Highway Administration, 2013). Stand-alone funding sources from previous surface transportation bills that have remaining money available, such as Surface Transportation Program set-aside for Transportation Enhancement Activities (STP TE) or Safe Routes to School (SRTS), continue to be distributed until the funding is exhausted.

2.2. Alternative funding sources

Different cities have found ways to fund their bicycle and pedestrian facilities though local option taxes, developer requirements, crowdsourcing, parklets policies and fees, and cordon pricing. Local option taxes are typically voter-approved, single-county sales taxes that are tied to legally binding expenditure plans (Goldman, 2005; Goldman and Wachs, 2003). In many states, they increasingly dominate transportation planning and finance. They have the ability to create opportunities for innovation by empowering interest groups and policy entrepreneurs to play more direct roles in transportation decision-making (Goldman et al., 2001). As a part of its Great Streets master plan, Austin, TX has developed streetscape design standards for its downtown core (City of Austin, 2012). Developers are required to implement these streetscape standards at their own cost, but can qualify for partial reimbursement. City of Austin reimbursement funds are from a 30% set aside of parking revenues collected in the Great Streets program boundary area.

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