

# City of Alexandria, Virginia

## MEMORANDUM

DATE: NOVEMBER 20, 2019

TO: MEMBERS OF THE TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION

FROM: HILLARY ORR, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, TRANSPORTATION

SUBJECT: AGENDA ITEM # 5 – LETTER TO CTB REGARDING PROPOSED CHANGES TO SMART SCALE AND HSIP GRANT PROGRAMS

---

**ISSUE:** Consideration of a letter to the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) opposing proposed changes to the grant program.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That the Transportation Commission consider and sign the draft letter to CTB.

**BACKGROUND:** The [SMART SCALE grant](#) has proven essential in ensuring that the transportation investments made both statewide and within the region are demonstrated to efficiently move people and goods and improve safety. It has been recognized nationally as a successful grant program for providing sorely needed funds for transit, bicycle and pedestrian projects that lead to real congestion mitigation and safety and promote the region's environmental sustainability. [In 2019, the City received funding for:](#)

- Design and construction of infrastructure for Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) in the West End of Alexandria, including pedestrian and bicycle facilities, streetscape improvements and buses — \$57.2 million.
- Enhancement of southwest access to the Potomac Yard Metrorail Station — \$50 million.
- Expansion of the DASH fleet and commitment to the purchase and maintenance of zero-emission vehicles — \$17.4 million.
- Improvements to both walkability and transit accessibility in the area around Landmark Mall, including safe crossings over Van Dorn and Duke Streets — \$6.3 million.
- Safety improvements for all modes of transportation and traffic congestion reduction at Duke St. and West Taylor Run Parkway — \$5.7 million.

Additionally, The [Highway Safety Improvement Program \(HSIP\)](#) is a core program administered at the federal level by the U.S. Department of Transportation's (USDOT) Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Office of Safety. HSIP's purpose is to make significant progress in reducing highway fatalities and serious injuries on all public roadways. The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) Traffic Engineering Division (TED) administers the Federal and State highway safety programs within the Commonwealth of Virginia.

**DISCUSSION: SMART SCALE:** Because road widening projects in other jurisdictions did not score well and were not funded, VDOT has been tasked with [re-examining the scoring criteria](#). Many of the changes put transit, bicycle and pedestrian projects at a disadvantage, and projects in denser areas in general. Specifically, the changes to the scoring criteria include:

- Land Use – By excluding existing land use from the scoring criteria, this change will make denser places much less competitive. These are the places that face the most congestion, where transit and bike/ped projects are most successful, and where reducing SOV driving has the biggest potential.
- Congestion – by including weekend congestion measures, this change would penalize jurisdictions that have already successfully dealt with local congestion but are struggling to handle regional traffic. This regional traffic is obviously essential to the region’s and state’s economy, which is why more assistance needs to be provided. In addition, these weekday solutions are often sustainable options like transit and bike/ped projects that actually improve congestion.
- Safety – We applaud the State’s goal of Achieving Zero Deaths, this is also in line with Alexandria’s, Arlington’s, and Richmond’s Vision Zero policies of eliminating all traffic-related deaths and serious injuries. However, the proposed change to this criterion would prioritize number of crashes, like fender benders, over severity. This does not meet the State’s nor the jurisdictions’ safety goals. Also, while safety is a priority, the increased score should not be solely taken from the Land Use category, but rather evenly distributed.
- Project Readiness – While we fully understand the desire to have a fully approved and planned project to fund, the requirement to have completed all of these preliminary approvals *before* the application submittal is unnecessary. Funding comes 6-7 years after application, and it is unreasonable to force a project to wait over half a decade to implement when many of these approvals can be completed before funding becomes available. Instead, the City urges *more* flexibility in transit and bike/ped projects to ensure timely delivery and high-quality projects, and elimination of the need to rescore projects and risk losing funding when changes are necessary.
- Transit Maintenance Facilities – By requiring any maintenance facility expansion to include increases to transit system capacity, this proposed change restricts funding for transit state of good repair projects. If these projects are not funded, the result may be a decrease of existing service for some jurisdictions. Decreasing transit service would run counter to SMART SCALE’s goals of reducing congestion.

HSIP: The HSIP has funded many important projects at high crash locations. However, under the [proposed changes](#), most potentially eligible improvements are focused on rural safety, ignoring the needs of state and county highways that are more urban in nature, require different treatments, and could save just as many lives. Therefore, the City has the following comments:

- Include bicycle infrastructure – The current list completely omits any mention of bicycles and bicycle safety, even as more people statewide are biking. CTB should include bicycle safety and infrastructure projects (such as striping for bicycle lanes, road diets, etc.) as eligible low-cost, high-benefit improvements.

- Expand definition of “Pedestrian Crossings” – Pedestrian safety measures that are eligible for HSIP funding should include Rapid Flash Beacons, HAWK signals, street lighting, sidewalks, curb ramps, curb extensions, pedestrian refuges, advanced markings, signs, etc. and not simply crosswalks. These are relatively inexpensive when compared to intersection re-designs and other capital projects and they have been shown to save lives.
- Provide more funding for intersection and corridor improvements – Often by targeting high crash locations and corridors, jurisdictions can solve for unsafe conditions unique to a particular location. The proposed breakdown would restrict funds for these effective treatments. Also, focusing on low-cost solutions and smaller grant amounts reduces the effectiveness of the program because these smaller grants require just as much staff resources as larger grants.

**Attachment 1: DRAFT letter to CTB opposing proposed changes to the SMART SCALE and HSIP programs**