DEFENDING SMART SCALE

INTRODUCTION

SMART SCALE is Virginia’s nationally recognized tool for scoring and ranking transportation proposals for funding. Prior to its adoption, funding decisions were largely made outside of public view and without objective standards to measure and compare proposals. In 2014, the General Assembly unanimously adopted a new law requiring that each project undergo a cost-benefit analysis that assesses a broad array of important benefits, including congestion relief, improved job access, coordination with nearby land uses, and pollution impacts. The overall benefit score for each project is divided by the funds requested, and proposals are ranked and recommended for funding based on their benefit per dollar. The Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) then reviews the rankings in deciding which projects to include in the Six-Year Plan.

By adding much-needed transparency and objective measurement to the funding process, SMART SCALE helps ensure that we choose the most cost-effective projects and consider the transportation, economic, land use, and environmental impacts each proposal would have.

BACKGROUND

Recently, some state and local officials have made proposals that would significantly undermine SMART SCALE, including calls to eliminate all consideration of project cost, eliminate the land use factor, significantly increase the weight given to the congestion mitigation criterion, and fund some projects outside of the SMART SCALE process.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSIDERING COST

Removing “cost” from a cost-benefit analysis erodes the value of SMART SCALE as a tool. Responsible transportation decision-making and wise stewardship of taxpayer dollars requires that we consider the cost of a project or strategy. By dividing projects’ benefits by their cost, SMART SCALE ensures taxpayers are getting the largest value per dollar spent. It also provides an incentive for local governments and regional agencies to work with the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) to consider design changes and other ways to reconfigure projects in a way that would provide similar benefits but at a lower cost, or to solve the problem with a more creative approach.

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AVOIDING CIRCUMVENTION OF SMART SCALE

Almost every session, bills and budget provisions are introduced that would direct funding to a specific project and avoid SMART SCALE. This strategy completely undermines the purpose and value of using a system like SMART SCALE that requires each proposal to be compared against others and objectively ranked. Notably, the CTB is not required to strictly adhere to the project ranking and funding recommendations that come out of SMART SCALE; it may fund any proposal if it finds that the benefits the project would generate are worth its cost and impacts. However, those decisions to elevate a particular project despite its SMART SCALE scoring rank should remain the province of the state’s transportation policy body to avoid highly political decisions about which projects to fund—the very thing SMART SCALE was designed to avoid.

CONCLUSION

SMART SCALE is serving the Commonwealth’s best interests by ensuring that transportation funding decisions are supported by objective project evaluation and that limited transportation dollars are wisely spent. Efforts to weaken the criteria or circumvent scoring altogether must be rejected, and transparency in the funding process must be maintained.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Oppose any attempt to remove consideration of cost from SMART SCALE.
- Oppose any attempt to eliminate consideration, or reduce the weighting, of the land use factor from consideration in those areas where it applies.
- Oppose any measure giving even greater weight to congestion mitigation as a priority for state or regional funding, as well as any effort to weaken or eliminate environmental quality measures in project scoring.
- Oppose any effort to exempt a particular project from the funding prioritization process.
- Support extending the land use measure to other metropolitan planning areas.