



Press Release

Contact: Jeremy Gunderson
(202) 244-2405
jer@cfte.org

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Rating and Evaluating New Starts More Government Regulation is Not the Answer

In a recent “Innovation Brief” titled “Rating and Evaluating ‘New Starts’”, C. Kenneth Orski offers his interpretation of a number of concerns raised by House Transportation Appropriations subcommittee members and others about the New Starts evaluation process, particularly as it relates to selection criteria and cost-effectiveness of the projects that local communities decide will best meet their transportation needs. In addition to overstating the problem, the prescription described in this piece – more federal government regulation – seems outdated at best and is completely inconsistent with the bipartisan philosophy of local control that serves as the foundation of our Nation’s transportation laws.

“Clearly, local communities have a better sense of the kind of traffic solutions that will be most effective, both in terms of cost as well as long term benefits, for their citizens,” said Stephanie Vance, Program Manager for the Center for Transportation Excellence. “Asking the Federal Government to develop and approve these solutions seems outdated and inconsistent: it’s like suggesting we should now have ‘federally-preferred local alternatives,’ said Vance.

In a response to this piece, CFTE seeks to demonstrate that many of the proposals might actually create more problems than their supporters suggest they would solve. In addition, the Center offers a sixth, preferred solution: to meet the demand from local communities for New Starts investments. One potential way to achieve this goal would be to even the playing field by requiring highway investments to undergo the same rigorous process for funding as New Starts.

In developing the analysis, CFTE first addressed the underlying concern about the number of projects in the New Starts pipeline. “In fact, the term “pipeline” is really a misnomer,” said Vance. “The process actually acts more as a funnel.” Where critics of New Starts express concern about the “over 150 projects” in planning studies and preliminary stages, many fail to recognize that only about a ¼ of the original projects authorized under ISTEA and TEA-21 legislation have or could receive FFGAs.

In addition to overstating the problem, CFTE argues that solutions Mr. Orski describes are inappropriate and harmful. (It should be noted that these solutions were not proposed by Mr. Orski, rather, they are his interpretation of the views and thoughts of House Transportation Appropriations subcommittee members.)

1. Critics’ Proposed Solution: Assert more control over the alternatives analysis process.
Problem with this approach: Creating a “federally preferred alternative”, as opposed to the existing “locally preferred alternative” flies in the face of the framework of ISTEA and TEA 21

2. Critics Proposed Solution: Give more weight to cost-effectiveness in the rating process.
Problem with this approach: Critics tend to define “cost-effectiveness” only in terms of short term dollars as opposed to looking at the long-term economic benefits of public transportation investments.
3. Critics Proposed Solution: Reduce the prominence of land use as a selection criterion.
Problem with this approach: Land use, and the transit oriented development that inevitably surrounds new transit stations, is perhaps one of the most important long-term benefits that transit can bring to a community.
4. Critics Proposed Solution: Projects should be focused on region-wide congestion relief.
Problem with this approach: The idea that individual projects, whether light rail, BRT or other modes of transit, should serve to reduce congestion across an entire region at all times of the day or night is untenable.
5. Critics Proposed Solution: Develop better methods of estimating ridership on rail systems.
Problem with this approach: In some cases, the real agenda here may be to develop methods that show a reduced demand for riders. FTA has already devoted a tremendous amount of time and scrutiny to ensuring that localities have the most current and accurate techniques available.

The Preferred Solution: Invest Adequately in the New Starts Process

CFTE suggests that it makes more sense to consider how we can provide adequate funding for a wildly popular program that has been hugely successful in returning gas tax revenues back to local communities. In addition, CFTE raises the question of leveling the playing field. “If it is so important to ensure that local communities are selecting the most cost-effective, land use appropriate, regional congestion relieving transportation options, why not subject all transportation options including roads and highways to this rigorous process?,” said Vance. In targeting New Starts, and specifically light rail projects, it is clear that public transportation’s critics are seeking to use federal policy to promote some solutions over others. The bipartisan spirit of our Nation’s transportation laws rejected this approach in past years, and should continue to do so in the future.

About the Center for Transportation Excellence

The Center for Transportation Excellence (CFTE) is a clearinghouse for information in support of quality transportation choices. CFTE is committed to two main objectives: (1) defending the merits of transit and (2) equipping local leaders with the information they need to be successful with their public transportation initiatives and ballot measures. The Center can be found on the web at www.cfte.org

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