

Layne: Revolutionizing transportation

Aubrey Layne | Posted: Saturday, June 25, 2016 10:30 pm

Virginia made transportation history this June when the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) voted to fully fund the first wave of infrastructure projects that were scored and selected based on an objective, data-driven process.

The CTB approved \$1.7 billion to build 163 projects, including roads, bridges and public transportation that will benefit every region of the state.

The vote is historic because never before has the state had a way to select the right transportation projects that generate the most benefit for the money.

This common sense, pragmatic approach to funding projects is just one example of how Gov. Terry McAuliffe is putting good governance ahead of politics on issues, ranging from transportation to research and development to workforce training, and it's an approach that has won bipartisan support from the General Assembly.

It took an all-out collaborative effort, along with extensive participation from localities and regional bodies across the state, to launch project prioritization, formerly called House Bill 2.

Numerous meetings and work sessions were held across the state, involving officials and the public, on an outcome-based scoring system, the only one of its kind in the country.

The process has a new name, SMART SCALE, Funding the Right Transportation Projects in Virginia. SMART SCALE stands for System for the Management and Allocation of Resources for Transportation, and the key factors used in evaluating a project's merits: improvements to safety, congestion reduction, accessibility, land use, economic development, and the environment.

Here's how SMART SCALE is working:

As required by law, a scoring system was developed based on the key factors. Each locality weighed in on the process. This gave localities a consistent set of standards to select projects for scoring. Last fall more than 130 localities, metropolitan planning organizations, and transit agencies submitted projects totaling nearly \$7 billion to be scored when \$1.7 billion was available. An objective prioritization process becomes critical when the funding requests quadruple the money available.

The projects were screened and scored, and recommendations for funding were based on top-scoring projects.

These scenarios were reviewed, revised, and presented to localities, legislators, and the public for their



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input.

The CTB had the final say and voted on the projects during their June meeting.

Another major change: The 163 projects are fully funded through all phases of development and construction.

In the past, projects were often partially funded, dragging out the construction time-frame and increasing costs. Politics and wish lists determined what got built. No more.

SMART SCALE revolutionizes the way Virginia delivers transportation. Projects are scored based on their merits and value. Once they are scored, CTB members have the information needed to make the best decisions and are held accountable. Project scoring information and results are online, and made available at numerous public meetings. We have gone from an opaque system to a system our citizens can understand.

With the SMART SCALE process legislated into law, future administrations can't develop wish lists on a whim. Projects must be scored and vetted through the data-driven system. The secretary of transportation can't decide a project list. Neither can the General Assembly nor the governor.

The process now drives the transportation program, with the goal of generating the maximum benefit for hard-earned tax dollars.

The impact to localities is profound. They have a sound process to guide their thinking so they can analyze the most critical transportation needs. Once projects are scored and selected by the CTB for funding, localities can count on them getting built.

In addition to SMART SCALE, the governor's 2015 Omnibus Transportation bill, now law, revamped the old transportation funding formula to get the most out of public resources. About half the money goes to new construction under SMART SCALE and the other half funds deteriorated bridges and pavements, called State of Good Repair. This program is subject to an asset management process so the most critical needs are addressed to ensure safety and to protect the massive public investment in Virginia's extensive highway infrastructure.

Since the CTB makes the final decisions on project selection and funding, it is important members do so without undue political pressure.

Another facet of the transportation law is that CTB members no longer serve at the pleasure of the governor and can only be removed for cause. This enables them to vote their conscience and do what is right.

Governor McAuliffe is a strong supporter of this reform because he understands that members need to have the independence to make the best decisions for our commonwealth.

With these game-changing reforms in place, Virginians should experience a better transportation system, one that funds the right projects, empowers localities to select projects that best benefit their residents, and enables the state to enter into the right deal for the taxpayers of Virginia.