

\$80m in US funds for bike projects unspent in Mass.

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State ranks last, tapping 37% of grants since 1991

By Alan Wirzbicki, Globe Correspondent | April 14, 2009

WASHINGTON - Despite a recent declaration by Governor Deval Patrick that encouraging bicycling is a priority for his administration, Massachusetts ranks last in the nation among all states in requesting federal funds for bike lanes, rail-trails, and similar improvements - and has failed to use more than \$80 million set aside for the state.

Since 1991, the state has only spent about 37 percent of its share of the funding designated by Congress for such projects, a far lower rate than in any other state, according to federal statistics. By comparison, Connecticut and Rhode Island have spent 99 percent of their federal funding.

Massachusetts has been allocated \$135 million for bike and pedestrian funding since 1991, and has used \$51.1 million. Critics blame the gap on a cumbersome application process that requires cities and towns to pay for planning and engineering studies, submit applications to two state agencies, and then wait, sometimes for years.

"It's an embarrassment," said Steven E. Miller, a board member of Livable Streets, a Cambridge-based group that advocates for transportation alternatives.

Transportation advocates said that the state's application process is so slow and intricate that some municipalities do not bother to apply. A typical rail-trail project in Massachusetts takes about 10 years to complete.

Because cities and towns must initiate projects, they are more likely to run into local opposition.

As a result, numerous plans for bikeways, rail-trails, and pedestrian projects have been delayed or the organizers have been forced to seek other funding sources.

"Things that could be getting built are not getting built," said David Watson, executive director of MassBike, a coalition of Bay State bicyclists.

In a transportation plan released in February, the governor pledged to increase support for biking and pedestrian facilities.

Colin Durrant, a spokesman for the Executive Office of Transportation, said the state has hired consultants to overhaul its procedure for handling federal grants.

The federal government began subsidizing bicycle and pedestrian projects in 1991, when Congress sought to encourage biking, walking, and increase use of mass transit. Since then, the program's grants have been credited with sparking a nationwide expansion of rail-trails and bicycle facilities.

The majority of states, including the other five New England states, spent more than 85 percent of their share of federal funding through 2007, according to statistics compiled by the National Transportation Enhancements Clearinghouse, a group sponsored by the Federal Highway Administration, and the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy that tracks annual state-by-state spending.

In Massachusetts, however, much less of the money has reached local projects.

The federal funding has "basically been off the table," said Wendy Landman, executive director of WalkBoston, a nonprofit that encourages pedestrian improvements.

Colleen Abrams - president of Wachusett Greenways, a partially completed network of bike trails in central Massachusetts - said the group met with state officials in the 1990s to discuss applying for federal funding, but was warned off.

"It sounded pretty much like a long road," she said. "We haven't even tried to access it."

Instead, the project is being funded by private donations, state tourism grants, and a separate, smaller federal program that supports recreation projects.

A few projects have successfully earned federal grants, including bikeways in Bedford, Greenfield, and Boston.

The fact that Massachusetts, unlike many other states, requires towns and cities to pay for initial studies deters many communities from applying, said Michelle Ciccolo, vice president of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, one of the agencies that reviews applications for bike and pedestrian projects in the Boston area.

"The design of something like a bike path is often a lower priority at a time when we need every penny we can to fix potholes," she said of the reaction of cities and towns.

The \$80 million in federal funding left unused by Massachusetts theoretically remains available. Finding a way to use the balance is "definitely a concern" for the state, Durrant said.

However, budget analysts said the money would become increasingly difficult to tap because unused funds are periodically recalled by the federal government.

"Certainly, everyone would agree that it's not good to let the money just sit there," said Tracy Loh, program coordinator at the National Transportation Enhancements Clearinghouse. "Rescissions can happen at any time."

Durrant said the historically low rate of spending on bike and pedestrian projects in Massachusetts reflects decisions by past administrations to channel every available dollar to highways, especially the Big Dig, the \$15 billion Central Artery/Third Harbor Tunnel project.

The federal government sets spending levels for each state that are slightly higher than a state is actually allowed to spend each year and then gives the states wide latitude to choose how to make cuts to reach the lower level.

"Given the limited amount of funding that was left over for all statewide needs" after accounting for the Big Dig, "worthy enhancement project were forced to compete with critical bridge and highway repairs that were required for safety and maintenance," Durrant said.

The federal transportation bill is up for renewal this year, and some environmental groups have called on Congress to crack down on states like Massachusetts that have taken money out of programs like bicycle and pedestrian spending while preserving highway funds.

In the meantime, advocates said they hope the Patrick administration's review would free up a much needed source of money.

Landman, for one, said that if the state could "shake loose" federal grants, it would open new possibilities for projects across the state.

"I don't know how we ended up like this, at the bottom of the barrel," she said. "There is absolutely a pent-up demand."