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## Cities Lose Out on Road Funds From Federal Stimulus

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Two-thirds of the country lives in large metropolitan areas, home to the nation's worst traffic jams and some of its oldest roads and bridges. But cities and their surrounding regions are getting far less than two-thirds of federal transportation stimulus money.

According to an analysis by The New York Times of 5,274 transportation projects approved so far — the most complete look yet at how states plan to spend their stimulus money — the 100 largest metropolitan areas are getting less than half the money from the biggest pot of transportation stimulus money. In many cases, they have lost a tug of war with state lawmakers that urban advocates say could hurt the nation's economic engines.

The stimulus law provided \$26.6 billion for highways, bridges and other transportation projects, but left the decision on how to spend most of it to the states, which have a long history of giving short shrift to major metropolitan areas when it comes to dividing federal transportation money. Now that all 50 states have beat a June 30 deadline by winning approval for projects that will use more than half of that transportation money, worth \$16.4 billion, it is clear that the stimulus program will continue that pattern of spending disproportionately on rural areas.

"If we're trying to recover the nation's economy, we should be focusing where the economy is, which is in these large areas," said Robert Puentes, a senior fellow at the [Brookings Institution's](#) Metropolitan Policy Program, which advocates more targeted spending. "But states take this peanut-butter approach, taking the dollars and spreading them around very thinly, rather than taking the dollars and concentrating them where the most complex transportation problems are."

The 100 largest metropolitan areas also contribute three-quarters of the nation's economic activity, and one consequence of that is monumental traffic jams. A [study of congestion in urban areas](#) released Wednesday by the Texas Transportation Institute found that traffic jams in 2007 cost urban Americans 2.8 billion gallons of wasted gas and 4.2 billion hours of lost time.

The Times analysis shows that a little more than half of the stimulus money will be spent on "pavement improvement" projects, mostly repaving rutted and potholed roads. Nearly one-tenth of it will be spent to fix or replace bridges. More than a quarter of the money will be spent to widen roads or build new roads or bridges.

But the projects also offered vivid evidence that metropolitan areas are losing the struggle for stimulus money. Seattle found itself shut out when lawmakers in the State of Washington divided the first pot of

stimulus money. Missouri has directed nearly half its money to 89 small counties which, together, make up only a quarter of the state's population. The United States Conference of Mayors, which did [its own analysis](#) of different data last month, concluded that the nation's metropolitan areas were being "shortchanged."

Pat McCrory, the mayor of Charlotte, N.C., said his city "did pretty terrible" when it came to getting money. Of the \$423 million in projects approved so far in North Carolina, only \$7.8 million is going to Mecklenburg County, the state's most populous county and the home of Charlotte.

Cleveland was initially promised \$200 million of Ohio's stimulus money to help build a five-lane bridge to replace the 50-year-old [Innerbelt Bridge](#), which is so deteriorated that officials banned heavy truck traffic on it last fall. But state officials, worried about meeting federal deadlines, took back \$115 million in stimulus money and decided to use it on shovel-ready projects elsewhere.

The state promised to find another source of money for the bridge project, but now Ohio's largest stimulus project is the \$150 million it is spending to build the [Nelsonville Bypass](#) in southeastern Ohio, which officials say will alleviate a bottleneck and improve transportation to Appalachia.

Transportation experts said the stimulus was drawing attention to a longstanding trend.

"We have a long history of shortchanging cities and metropolitan areas and allocating transportation money to places where few people live," said Owen D. Gutfreund, an assistant professor of urban planning at the [City University of New York](#) who wrote "20th Century Sprawl: Highways and the Reshaping of the American Landscape" (Oxford University Press, 2004).

Professor Gutfreund said that in some states the distribution was driven by statehouse politics, with money spread to the districts of as many lawmakers as possible, or given out as political favors. In others, he said, the money is distributed by formulas that favor rural areas or that give priority to state-owned roads, often found far outside of urban areas.

Mayors had lobbied Congress to send the money directly to cities, but in the end, 70 percent of the money was sent to the states to be divided, and 30 percent was sent to metropolitan planning organizations, which represent the local governments in many metropolitan areas.

Those organizations were not bound by the June 30 deadline for getting their projects approved, so metropolitan areas could eventually see their share of the transportation money go up. Other pots of money in the transportation bill stand to benefit metropolitan areas more, including the \$8.4 billion for mass transit and the \$1.5 billion that the federal Department of Transportation can award to projects of national or regional importance.

Some cities have been delayed in winning approval for their projects. New York City is expecting \$261 million of the highway stimulus money. It had hoped to start work in May on its biggest project, a \$175 million rehabilitation of the [St. George Ferry Terminal](#) in Staten Island, but the project has yet to win approval.

Transportation is currently a hot topic in Washington, where Congress plans to pass a new six-year transportation law within the next year and a half. Washington's difficulty in directing its transportation aid has led to calls for a national infrastructure bank, which would rank projects and help them get financed.

Obama administration officials, who have called for ending sprawl and making sure that federal transportation spending is cost-effective, say they are looking at how states are spending the money from the stimulus law, officially called the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, to learn about the strengths and weaknesses of the current system.

“The transparency that comes with Recovery Act funds is letting us see what’s happening in real time, and that’s a good thing,” said Roy Kienitz, an under secretary of transportation for policy. “Understanding where recovery dollars go and why will help us determine how to shape long-term transportation policies with the goal of getting the most benefit for every dollar.”

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