



FEDERAL INFRASTRUCTURE FUNDING Priorities, Distribution, and Access

by

Infrastructure Immersion Team 2022

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Introduction

Recent infrastructure bills from the federal government provided a current backdrop for our work. This project examines how different entities in the Richmond region view infrastructure priorities, the involvement of the public in prioritizing infrastructure needs, and how citizens and nonprofits can advocate for and receive federal infrastructure funding.

Journey - Scope of Immersion

Our immersion team decided early in the process to focus on the “people” aspect of infrastructure as well as how nonprofits (and others) can advocate for infrastructure funding from the federal government. We wanted to understand how funds are distributed and how they can be accessed. Also, how do citizens get to weigh in on this process? The ultimate goal was to inform citizens about the process and educate them about how this funding is being implemented.

Findings

Our key finding is that not a lot is known at this point about current federal infrastructure funds that are available! Most funding will be through a competitive grant process, but there are still many questions about what the process will be for applying for the funds, when the applications will be available, and when the funds would then be available.

Another key finding that surfaced in several conversations is just how difficult it is for nonprofits to apply for, receive, and/or manage federal funding. Nonprofits typically would receive funding as part of a partnership with a local government, which would be the main applicant. And, even local governments struggle with the burden of applying for federal funds—it requires a lot of staff time and expertise in managing and reporting back on federal funds.

Additionally, federal infrastructure funding typically does not make up a significant portion of the funding that localities need. It sounds like a large number, but normally is only a small percentage of what local governments require for the infrastructure budgets.

As with many government-related programs, infrastructure is complicated and bureaucratic. Most localities and regional organizations try to get public involvement in

the process through public hearings or community meetings, but they have found it difficult to get engagement. Also, funding is typically not available for a few years, so it is hard to address needs quickly.

And, most elected officials and government administrations have different priorities (as evidenced in our interviews), and it can be hard to coalesce a group around a single goal or request. Organizations like ChamberRVA try to build coalitions to address this concern and get consensus around regional issues. They work with groups like PlanRVA and TPO.

When done correctly, infrastructure can be a “powerful tool to create parity,” as a representative from Chesterfield County told our group. Federal funding, in particular, “makes for good media, but is not a panacea.” It is also difficult to get the public engaged in long-range planning for projects that may not happen for 20-25 years (PlanRVA).

Key Learning Points

It’s complicated! There are many great organizations in the Richmond region working on regional cooperation around infrastructure needs. At the same time, each locality, and the state itself, has priorities they want addressed. And, in the meantime, nonprofits, and individual citizens get lost in the shuffle of the bureaucracy.

The federal government moves slowly. There has not been good communication around infrastructure funding—what will be available, how to apply for it, and for what it can be used. While the federal government moves slowly, localities have to be ready with shovel-ready projects. And, by the time a project is shovel-ready, the public input into the process probably happened years ago.

Many of the localities explained how long it takes to go from an idea to a fully completed project and how this makes it difficult to respond quickly to citizen requests. Thus, many citizens might conclude that their concerns are not being addressed as bureaucracy prevents quick action. With the design of this process, it is difficult to inform citizens about how to have an active voice and inform nonprofits how to advocate for funding.

Recommendations and/or Call to Action

While we can’t change the way that the federal government operates, we can create ways locally for people to be more informed about the process of how federal funds are distributed. We can also propose ways to increase the capacity of multiple actors in the region to be in a better position to apply for funding. And, we can attempt to create more equity in how funds are distributed locally.

As DaBacker and Evans (2022) state, “it is imperative that philanthropy help reset not only what infrastructure is built, for whom, and to what purpose—but also who designs and builds it, and what systems of accountability are incorporated into the process.” The

authors suggest several tools that can be used to increase equity, three of which we recommend be adopted in the Richmond region:

- 1) Community Advocacy: Industry lobbyists are paid to find ways to secure funding for their respective industries. Nonprofits and other community-based organizations also need coordinated advocacy efforts as well. Private funding for advocacy can help these groups inform the community (and government) about infrastructure needs and build a stronger case for support and financial investment.
- 2) Community Voice: Community-based organizations and their members are in the best position to know the direct needs of the neighborhoods they serve. Organizations like PlanRVA, ChamberRVA, the Greater Richmond Partnership, etc. can make sure that community-based groups have a seat at the table and are included in important conversations about infrastructure so they are part of the process from the very beginning and can ensure widespread participation and representation. Or better yet, they can reimagine what the table looks like, what is discussed, and who is there.
- 3) Community Support: Many organizations need technical assistance to be in a position to apply for federal funding. The idea of “funding navigators” have been used in other communities to help nonprofits navigate federal funding opportunities. The Richmond philanthropic community could invest in funding navigators to help community organizations learn about federal funding opportunities and how to apply for them. Also, investing in the capacity of organizations to apply is necessary as well as the sharing of resources, information, and staff when groups can coalesce around similar issues.

Sources

Interviews: City of Richmond, Chesterfield County, Henrico County, Plan RVA, ChamberRVA, Greater Richmond Partnership, Venture Richmond, State Senator Marsden

Data, Readings, etc.: As Earmarks Return, Federal Dollars to Flow to Virginia Projects through New U.S. Budget (https://richmond.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/as-earmarks-return-federal-dollars-to-flow-to-virginia-projects-through-new-u-s-budget/article_19293b60-b99e-5918-9d2b-62f0324e77f4.html?utm_source=richmond.com&utm_campaign=%2Fnewsletter-templates%2Fbreaking&utm_medium=PostUp&utm_content=b9badbb1ad68aaf4422772e6fc3e0f1b9443f612)

Making Federal Infrastructure Funding Equitable—What Philanthropy Can Do (https://nonprofitquarterly.org/making-federal-infrastructure-funding-equitable-what-philanthropy-can-do/?utm_content=204076909&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter&hss_channel=w-61206610)

PlanRVA and CVTA Documents: <https://planrva.org/home/document-library/>