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Charlotte could benefit in roads plan

Federal proposal would give money directly to large cities and let them choose their projects.

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The U.S. Department of Transportation wants large cities like Charlotte to get federal money directly, and have the freedom to spend the funds on transit and road projects of their choosing.

The program, if approved by Congress, could make it easier for Charlotte to expand mass transit. It could also give the city more power in deciding what highways should be built or improved.

U.S. Secretary of Transportation Mary Peters announced her Metropolitan Mobility Program on Wednesday morning at a news conference in Charlotte.

“We think cities today are very sophisticated,” Peters said about giving them more power.

When the Charlotte Area Transit System built the Lynx Blue Line, the federal government paid for half of the \$462.7 million construction cost. But CATS had to undergo a rigorous cost-benefit analysis that took several years, and the project barely met the Federal Transit Administration's criteria.

Under Peters' plan, Charlotte would get a certain amount of money annually. The city could spend all of the money on transit, all on highways, or a mix of the two. The current way transit projects are funded would be scrapped.

Peters' plan would call for all projects – whether they are roads or mass transit – to undergo a cost-benefit analysis. But cities would take the lead in conducting the studies, and the DOT said the process would be faster.

She said that requiring roads to be scrutinized would ensure there would be no “bridges to nowhere,” a reference to an infamous bridge in Alaska that handles few cars.

She also said it would be better than the current system, which “rewards rampant earmarks....and political muscle.”

Transit advocates have long called for roads to undergo the same scrutiny as mass transit projects.

CATS chief executive Keith Parker said he is encouraged by Peters' plan.

"It sounds like it would reduce some of the cumbersomeness of the federal process," Parker said. "Right now it can add three years to a project."

The U.S. DOT spends \$60 billion annually on surface transportation. The agency declined to speculate on how much money Charlotte would receive under the program.

Brian Turmail, a spokesman for the DOT, said it would be a "massive investment in federal aid."

Peters said she hoped the program could be passed by September 2009.

While in Charlotte, she praised Charlotte's initiative in conducting a study to create so-called HOT lanes on some area interstates.

HOT lanes – high-occupancy toll lanes – are reserved for people who are willing to pay a toll in exchange for a faster commute.



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