

Public transportation funding gaps and opportunities

Topline

Access to funding affects public transportation providers' ability to address unmet public transportation needs, especially in under-resourced communities.

Funding landscape

Transit agencies play a large role in addressing unmet public transportation needs. Transit agencies receive local, state, and federal funding. [In 2023](#), local sources (i.e., fares, taxes for transit) made up 80.7 percent of total funding for transit agencies statewide. State and federal sources accounted for 3.8 and 14.4 percent, respectively.

Other providers (i.e., cities and county governments, federally recognized tribes, nonprofits) help address unmet public transportation needs in communities. Of the 15 grants WSDOT administers for public transportation from state and federal sources, city and county governments are eligible for seven, federally recognized tribes are eligible for six, and nonprofits are eligible for five. Eleven of the 15 grants are competitive.

Gaps

- **Limited access to grants for service providers outside the transportation industry:** Service providers outside the transportation industry (i.e., community-based organizations) face challenges navigating the transportation funding landscape and often struggle to access grant funding. These organizations largely serve the mobility needs of vulnerable populations.
- **Active Transportation Connections:** Coordinated funding efforts between public and active transportation providers can dramatically improve access in Washington state, particularly in areas with limited support for non-drivers. Funding for active transportation is available via the Move Ahead Washington funding package. Passed by legislature in 2022, it includes \$1.3 billion for active transportation and \$3 billion for public transportation.
- **Rural transit deserts:** Rural communities remain dependent on cars have the state's most significant gaps in public transportation. Nondrivers in these communities face substantial mobility barriers to accessing essential services such as education, employment, and healthcare.
- **Funding gaps for small and tribal transit providers:** Despite strong connections with their communities and nondrivers, small transit agencies, nonprofit transportation providers, and tribal transit providers face challenges with rider eligibility requirements, capacity to apply for grants, and securing matching funds for grants. These challenges limit their access to funding and hinder their ability to meet community needs.

Opportunities

- **Pedestrian networks and public transportation:** There's an opportunity to improve first/last-mile connections to public transportation by collaborating with and providing funding to city and county governments that manage pedestrian facilities. These connections are crucial for people who rely on public transportation but need to walk or roll to and from stops.
- **Organizations serving nondrivers:** Nondrivers often depend on public transportation for all their trips. Community-based organizations that serve nondrivers, even if not primarily focused on transportation, provide valuable insight into nondrivers' transportation needs. Collaborating with and providing funding to these organizations can help co-create a public transportation system that meets the needs of everyone in Washington.
- **Access to competitive grants:** Public transportation funding often focuses on competitive grants for transit agencies. However, small or rural transit agencies, nonprofit transportation providers, tribal transit providers, and local governments face challenges accessing funding. Making grant programs more accessible to these providers could help support a more inclusive and effective public transportation network.

Findings to consider

- **Set asides for smaller providers:** To improve equity in access to state public transportation grants, WSDOT's [Green Transportation Capital Grant program](#) sets aside 10 percent of funding for transit agencies with an operating budget of less than \$15 million.
- **Preference for formula funding:** [Engagement conducted by the Washington State Transportation Commission](#) indicates that, of 118 respondents from local, regional and state agencies; nonprofits; the private sector; and the public, 86 percent prefer formula to competitive grants.

Contact

Samuel Gacad-Cowan

Samuel.Gacad-Cowan@wsdot.wa.gov

Title VI Notice to Public

It is the Washington State Department of Transportation's (WSDOT) policy to assure that no person shall, on the grounds of race, color, national origin, as provided by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be otherwise discriminated against under any of its programs and activities. Any person who believes his/her Title VI protection has been violated, may file a complaint with WSDOT's Office of Equity and Civil Rights (OECR). For additional information regarding Title VI complaint procedures and/or information regarding our non-discrimination obligations, please contact OECR's Title VI Coordinator at (360) 705-7090.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Information

This material can be made available in an alternate format by emailing the Office of Equity and Civil Rights at wsdotada@wsdot.wa.gov or by calling toll free, 855-362-4ADA(4232). Persons who are deaf or hard of hearing may make a request by calling the Washington State Relay at 711.