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[Are the New Transit Guidelines an Improvement?](#)

Last week Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood proposed new livability-based funding guidelines for major transit projects and rescinded Bush administration requirements that based funding decisions on how much a project shortened commute times compared to its cost. The criteria determine which projects get funded under the Federal Transit Administration's New Starts and Small Starts programs.

"We're going to free our flagship transit capital program from long-standing requirements that have allowed us only to green-light projects that meet very narrow cost and performance criteria," LaHood told the Transportation Research Board annual meeting on January 13. "Instead, as we evaluate major transit projects going forward, we'll consider all the factors that help communities reduce their carbon footprint, spur economic activity and relieve congestion. To put it simply, we will take livability into account."

What do you think of the new criteria that Secretary LaHood proposed? How would they improve the New Starts and Small Starts programs and how might they hurt them? What other changes would you propose making to the criteria for determining which transit projects receive federal funding?

Blumenauer Response

The simple answer is an emphatic yes. The Department of Transportation's new criteria will unleash funding for vital transportation projects across the nation that will not only spur economic growth, but reduce congestion time as well as our reliance on dirty, expensive fuels.

Yet it seems misleading to label the criteria announced by Secretary LaHood as new. When I authored Small Starts, which was signed into law in 2003, the original intent was to provide federal funding for smaller scale and less expensive transit projects. Which projects would be funded was to be determined by a variety of benefits, from economic development potential to environmental gains.

By dropping the Bush-era practice of focusing exclusively on travel-time savings for suburban commuters, Secretary LaHood has restored the integrity of this program. Consistent with President Obama and his administration's commitment to livability, and in the spirit of the law as written, DOT is doing the right thing by looking at a wide spectrum of economic and pollution reduction benefits.

The Obama administration is walking the walk when it comes to improving the capacity of all our communities, both urban and rural. Fundamental to making communities livable is to ensure people have more transportation options, from streetcars and bus-rapid transit to bike lanes. From New Orleans to Tucson, there are more than eighty cities exploring the streetcar, with a dozen projects in various states of development, even before this decision.

Portland has reaped enormous economic and environmental gains from our streetcar. In October, [Portland received the first ever Small Starts grant](#) . With this funding, we will more than double our streetcar system and in the process create nearly 1,300 high-wage construction and manufacturing jobs in Oregon, attract 2.4 million square feet of new development into the project area, and reduce regional vehicle miles traveled by an additional 28 million miles.

Since its inception, Small Starts has languished, but I am confident it will thrive under this administration and Secretary LaHood. The announcement of these new guidelines will make it possible for cities across the nation to reap the same benefits as Portland.