

SPECIAL FUNDING

Virginians Like ISTEA Just Fine

By Wayne T. Wilcox



A friend of mine has said he keeps looking in the want ads for a job as a retired millionaire. In the meantime, he's holding on to his day job. Treasure hunters scour the depths of the oceans for galleons filled with gold, or they dig up Bedford County looking for the Beale Treasure. All of us are looking for a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow (or anywhere else, for that matter). The ISTEA might be as close as we're going to get.

No, that's not a typo: ISTEA stands for the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991. It is the latest reauthorization of the congressional highway bill, and it will be in effect for the six fiscal years from 1992-1997.

WHAT IS ISTEA?

Actually, Congress did more than just reauthorize the highway bill. When President Bush signed it into law in December 1991, ISTEA mandated fundamental changes in how transportation planning would be viewed. Among other things, it required that environmental concerns be considered throughout the planning process. It gave more planning control to states and localities, and it created a framework for urban transportation policies.

One of the main programs in ISTEA is the Surface Transportation Program (STP). Ten percent of each state's STP money must be used for transportation enhancements. In Virginia, where the STP is about \$70 million per year, that amounts to \$7 million per year for enhancements (for the ten categories of enhancements, see sidebar, page 18). The states were given considerable leeway in how to administer the enhancement money, but the federal money may fund only 80 percent of any project.

ISTEA'S HISTORY IN THE OLD DOMINION

The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) faced special chal-

lenges in fitting the square pegs of ISTEA into its round holes. Specifically, federal highway money in Virginia before ISTEA was lumped with state money and then allocated to the localities by statute, using a formula. The statute needed changing to comply with ISTEA. Not surprisingly, that took quite a bit of time.

But VDOT kept working on it and watched the programs that other states were developing, and in January of 1993, VDOT announced its new Transportation Enhancement Program. It was designed as a grants program, with the Federal Highway Administration passing the money through VDOT to the localities which create, sponsor and manage the projects.

Bob Cassada, the state programming and scheduling engineer, said those at VDOT are enthusiastic about the program, seeing it as a win-win situation. He is responsible for the Transportation Enhancements Program. "VDOT can now fund projects which it previously couldn't touch," which would directly benefit all citizens, both locally and more broadly, he said.

SO HOW MUCH MONEY IS THERE?

Since VDOT's program started two years late, its use of the money had to catch up with its cache. The '93 program cycle was designed to use the first two years' worth of the allotment or about \$14 million! The '94 cycle will use the next two years' worth; another \$14 million. Then VDOT will be all caught up, so the '95 and '96 cycles will use the normal \$7 million annual allotments.

But don't get the idea that this is a pot of gold just waiting for you and you alone; competition is tough. In 1993, there were 219 applications for over \$73 million. This year, the competition is looking stronger. Many of 1993's applications are back (new and improved), and several applications which couldn't

be put together quickly enough for 1993 are ready this year.

HOW DOES VDOT SELECT THE PROGRAMS?

The selection process for funding has four steps.

First, VDOT screens the applications for objective criteria. For instance, does the project meet at least one of the enhancement criteria? And has the public hearing been held? And is the 20 percent local match ready?

Second, an enhancements advisory committee evaluates all of the remaining applications and makes a recommendation to the Commonwealth Transportation Board. This enhancements committee was created by VDOT to help with the program and is comprised of 15 citizen members who have no official affiliation with VDOT. They represent various advocacy groups and other state agencies.

In the '93 cycle, the volume of applications to be reviewed was so large that the committee divided itself into three working groups, each with a third of the applications. Each working group evaluated its third and selected the ten best projects. Then the groups got back together and worked to merge the lists, one project at a time. When the projects selected had used all the money, the committee shifted gears.

Third, the committee examined the distribution of the projects. The federal law required an "equitable distribution" of the projects but gave few guidelines on what that meant, so the committee evaluated three dimensions: geography, urban/rural, and the enhancements categories. The committee did this by arriving at a consensus, rather than by any mathematical formula. After making a few adjustments, the committee made its recommendations to the Commonwealth Transportation Board.

And fourth, the committee's recommendations were reviewed and approved with only a few changes by the Commonwealth Transportation Board, which has

Pictured above: volunteers work with Montgomery County staff, Virginia Tech students, and employees of Anderson & Associates on the Huckleberry Trail.

the primary responsibility in Virginia for making the final decisions.

According to Bob Cassada, "officials with VDOT think the advisory committee did a super job. The committee's job was to provide advice to the board, and the board took that advice."

But as with any new program, there are a few bugs to work out.

For instance, the criteria for evaluating applications are listed in the brochure which describes the program, but how these criteria are used to evaluate the applications is not described. Several of them are self evident, but several others are not.

Perhaps more troublesome, VDOT and the advisory committee have no scorecard for evaluating the applications or for documenting how applications were evaluated. The reasons behind the acceptance or rejection of any particular application in the '93 cycle cannot be given easily.

WELL, THEN: WHAT SETS THE WINNING APPLICATIONS APART?

For one thing, all the i's are dotted and all the t's are crossed. An incomplete application will probably not pass VDOT's initial screening. That will be the end of the line; the application will go no farther.

For another thing, the application shows a clear link to the *intermodal* transportation network. In the '93 cycle, at least one project which had been accepted by the advisory committee, the board and VDOT was nearly rejected by the Federal Highway Administration, which has final review of the program, because the application didn't adequately show the project's intermodal links.

That's the obvious part: good applications are complete, and their projects are eligible. But the winning applications went further.

Many projects had a unique feature, or a "hook," to attract the committee's attention. Remember, 15 people must review over 200 applications. Don't blend into the crowd.

Bob Cassada said that the committee was impressed by the high levels of public support and commitment from some of the applicants. Letters of support from civic organizations are great, but demonstrating that these people are actually working towards accomplishing the project (with or without the grant) carries more weight.

One example was the Huckleberry Trail, a rails/trails project for Montgomery County. Duane Hyde, a planner for the county, said that he'd heard that recommendations from congressmen and delegates held less sway than demonstrating a grassroots effort. That effort already had begun, with nearly a hundred volunteers cleaning brush and debris along the trail and building bridges, a Boy Scout building a bridge for his Eagle Scout project, and monetary donations from all around the New River Valley.

Cassada said the committee was also

impressed by the public support for the Route of Lee's Retreat, which involved *six counties*. The coordination work alone was a large undertaking showing commitment. So when it fits, a regional approach or interjurisdiction cooperation is helpful. Of course, if the project is entirely within one locality, you can't do this, but if connections can be made to other localities, *make them*.

And how better to show local support than with your own money? Increase the local share. So you reduce the federal share from 80 percent to 70-75 percent. You're still given three dollars for every one you put in!

Cassada also said that the committee has shown that it prefers to fund nuts and bolts projects that people can see, touch and use, rather than planning and feasibility studies. This may mean waiting another year, so that you can get all your ducks in a row before applying.

Having the project in your comprehensive plan demonstrates that the project has survived extra public scrutiny. It also shows that the project is real and wasn't just dreamed up to attract grant money.

Winning applications are usually brief. In the '93 cycle, some of the successful applications were only three pages long. Some applications which were thick enough to be bound in one inch three ring binders were successful, and others weren't. Again, remember that 15 people must review 200 applications, and they can't read all 50 pages of each one. If you can't be brief, include an abstract or executive summary.

Finally, take comfort: VDOT must compete with everyone else for grant money. There was concern that VDOT would keep *ALL* the enhancements money for its own pet projects, but that's not the way it is for now. The board could change this easily, but for now, VDOT's projects must be better than your project in the *committee's* eyes.

HOW TO MAXIMIZE YOUR CHANCES OF WINNING A GRANT

There's a big difference between grant winning and project planning. What can you do before you even begin writing the application?

First, you should start *now*. The March 31, 1995 deadline for the next round of applications might seem far away, but these applications can require a lot of work. Start working on the project as if you will do it with or without the enhancement grant. If the project has good public support, you might find that you don't even need the grant.

Start planning the details of the project. Determine what will be built and who will do what. Who will build which items or do the renovations? What local money can be used other than dipping into city coffers? Who owns the land, and who will own it after the project is completed? How will maintenance be handled? Might in kind contributions be

included? Applications which don't show this kind of preparation are less likely to be taken seriously.

One of the best resources in the planning process is a committee or a task force of local citizens, civic leaders, business people, and officials from the town, city and county governments. It may be true that the camel was the result of a committee trying to design a horse, but it's also true that two heads are better than one. A citizen's committee can do more to publicize the project locally and galvanize public support than one staff person alone.

Remember, public support is critical for the advisory committee, and it takes time to build momentum. Get some volunteers to start on the low tech work. Hundreds of people helped clear brush along the Huckleberry Trail, a fact which did not escape notice.

But don't bother politicking with the advisory committee. Instead, spend your time writing a better application. Cassada said that elbow rubbing made no difference last year; the best applications were picked, and the lesser applications weren't. On the other hand, talking about the project with as many people as possible can help tremendously. The VDOT Resident Engineer especially should know about it and can offer invaluable advice. This is the one person who should best know VDOT's plans for the area and what would make the application more appealing.

CONCLUSION

The ISTEA and the enhancements program may be a big bucket of money, but it's not bottomless. Five out of six applicants learned that the hard way in 1993. Knowing your way around the program and planning your project thoroughly are the best keys to submitting a successful application. ☐



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