

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

SAUL ROOM

PATHWAYS TO REGIONAL PROSPERITY

Washington, D.C.

Wednesday, May 14, 2025

This is an automated transcript that has been minimally reviewed. Please check against the recording for accuracy. If you find any significant errors of substance, please let us know at events@brookings.edu

WELCOME:

ADIE TOMER
Senior Fellow, Brookings Metro

EMILY WIER
Vice President, Chief Policy and Strategy Officer, Policy and Innovation Center

PANEL 1:

MODERATOR: AMY LIU
Presidential Advisor and Senior Fellow, Brookings Metro

ERIN ALEMAN
Executive Director, Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP)

JUSTIN KIEL
County Councilman, La Porte County, IL

TOM KOTARAC
Senior Vice President, Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago

PANEL 2:

MODERATOR: ADIE TOMER
Senior Fellow, Brookings Metro

CAROLINE SMITH
Assistant Chief Administrative Officer, San Diego County

GREG STUART
Executive Director, Broward Metropolitan Planning Organization

KEYNOTE:

RICK LARSEN
Member (D-Wash.), U.S. House of Representatives

* * * * *

TOMER: Okay, good morning, everyone. My name's Adie Tomer. Welcome to the Brookings Institution. We really appreciate you making it. We know it's a busy week. It was supposed to be raining today, so we feared that we wouldn't be able to fill the room. So, I'm gonna apologize to our events maestro, Christa, because she said we need to cap it, and sure enough, we are gonna overfill the room, so thanks to everyone for braving it. Thanks for everyone who's streaming online. Some really quick housekeeping before I hand it over to my colleague, Emily. The bathrooms are right outside the door. I'm looking at much as all our events people. We are casual folks. If you need to go, just go ahead and step outside. There's also coffee and pastries outside for you as well. And with that, let me hand it over to my colleague, Emily Wier, Vice President with the Policy and Innovation Center out of San Diego.

WIER: Good morning, everyone. My name is Emily Wier. And as Adie said, I'm the chief policy and strategy officer at the Policy and Innovation Center. I'm so glad to welcome everybody to today's conversation, one that we really hope will spark new ideas and momentum around how we invest in and support regions across the country. We are very proud to have partnered with Brookings Metro team on recent research that really dives into a core challenge. This mismatch between how federal infrastructure funding is delivered to regions and how regional economies actually function. This event today as part of Infrastructure Week is really an opportunity to bring that research to life with on-the-ground leaders from all across the country who are navigating these realities day in and day out. Now let's start with the obvious, almost all of us live in regions.

They're not just geographic areas. They're where economic growth happens, where housing markets stretch across city lines, where commutes and supply chains cut across jurisdictions. And as I'm sure this will not come to a shock, as any of you, but metropolitan regions alone produce some 90% of the nation's GDP last year. So, if we, as a country, are serious about broad-based economic growth, infrastructure, quality, and climate readiness. We have to be serious about investing in regions. But right now, our federal infrastructure funding systems are not built to do just that. The bulk of the dollars work through state agencies or siloed program channels. And that's not how regions work, where collaboration is always needed in order to plan, build, and deliver. And because too few dollars

arrive to underwrite regional visions, these regional leaders are constantly in searching for new partnerships, new funding streams that are local, and are constantly scrambling to put together new applications into an oversubscribed pool of funding. And that's nothing like the predictable funding streams and built-in muscle memory that we've afforded their state peers. At my organization and in the roles that me and my team see day in and day out, we have seen this firsthand.

Over the past few years, we have supported coalitions who have been applying for funding under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, applying for funds from the Economic Development Administration, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association. And every time we have seeing, even with good technical assistance and motivated partners, it feels like a reinvention of the wheel. And that's even though the local and regional actors really know. What the needs are for bridges, broadband, clean water, and resilient transit systems that knit together entire regions. There has to be a better way, and that's exactly what our research has found with Brookings Metro.

Together, we explored new federal delivery mechanisms like regional block grants that would allow funding to meet the scale and complexity of regional infrastructure needs. We found that regional actors are not only ready, they're eager for this work to begin. One that empowers them to make transformative long-term plans rather than scramble for piecemeal funding. Today's featured speakers bring those ideas to life. We'll start with insights from Chicago and then hear perspectives from leaders in San Diego and Broward County, each of whom will offer different perspectives on the regional challenges and opportunities that they face. We'll close with a federal perspective from Congressman Rick Larsen, a member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. Who's been a thoughtful champion on this issue. And with that, it is my pleasure to turn the mic over to Amy Liu, a Presidential Scholar and Senior Fellow at Brookings Metro, who will introduce our next panel. Thank you so much.

LIU: All right. Good morning. It's really great to be with you this morning. I just want to reinforce how important and timely this conversation we're going to have today is. As many of you know who are in the room, and I think around the country, we're in the midst of a major conversation in federal Washington about how to reimagine the role of federal government, federal programs, and nature of

federal spending. And at the same time, as you heard from Emily, we're having an active conversation in regions around the country about how to retain our global competitiveness, grow good jobs, and make sure that opportunity extends to everybody. And the question right now is, how do we align this federal moment to the realities that all of our metropolitan areas, as distinct as they are, how it aligns to all the distinct challenges that all our communities are currently facing.

I want to just reinforce that we're going to have a conversation here first among our panel and then open it up for about 10 minutes of Q&A. I really want to thank those who have joined us via Zoom. Some of you have sent some excellent questions in advance of this program and we're gonna do our best to address them as we have a conversation up here. And so, let me just reinforce who's joined us today. It's also on your program. To my left is Tom Kotarac. He said, just call him TK, who is the senior vice president of the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago, which is a major regional business group. To his left is Erin Aleman, who is the executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, CMAP, which is the regional MPO. And to her left is Councilman Justin Kiel, who hails from northwest Indiana and currently represents Laporte County, Indiana, and is a member of the Northwest Indiana Regional Planning Commission. So, I think we're going to have a great discussion. So, the first question I'm going to ask everyone, because this is supposed to be a conversation about the greater Chicago region, is do you guys actually work together? And because you do have a business group, an MPO, an elected official, yeah, tell us, do you work together. And if so, in what ways.

ALEMAN: All right, I guess I'm kicking us off here. I'm glad to be here for this conversation. I think not only is it timely, but you're sort of singing our tune here on the importance of regions. And so, it's just a thrilling conversation to be a part of. We do work together. I was just joking that TK is my second boss besides my board, you know, when you have the biggest civic sort of business organization in the region. And able to pick up the phone and call you. I mean, they care about infrastructure because it's important to our economy. And so, I'm constantly working with them and to our neighbors to the East, Northwest Indiana, we really care about critical greenways, about freight infrastructure. And so, I'm meeting on a quarterly basis with Justin's boss, or I guess you're Justin's, Justin is Ty's boss and meeting with him and talking about how important it is that we're working across state lines as well.

LIU: Do either of you want to add to that?

KOTARAC: She covered all the main points in the spot on.

LIU: Erin, since you've got the mic, I thought it would be also helpful for you to help our audience just situate Chicago for the audience here. What are sort of the big challenges and opportunities facing the Chicago region, and how does that inform the types of transformative infrastructure?

ALEMAN: Great, so when I say region, I mean the seven counties in northeastern Illinois, it's about 284 municipalities, eight and a half million people in our region. And so, as we think about the future, I mean we're thinking about quality of life, we're think about our regionally economic competitiveness and one of the great things about Chicago is we don't just make one thing, we make many things and we help deliver those goods to market because about 50% of all freight rail runs through Chicago, intermodal rail, and about \$3 trillion worth of goods. But we're also thinking about the impacts of all of this transportation on climate. And so those are some of the areas where we've spent a lot of time focusing over the past few years.

LIU: And give me an example, then, of a transformative regional infrastructure project that meets that vision.

ALEMAN: So, one comes to mind, the CREATE program, which is a big program to untangle the congestion between our freight rail operators and our passenger rail operators. We've been really trying over the past few decades to solve some of these problems. It's taken a long time. I think another project that comes to mind is our 290 corridor. It heads from the city of Chicago out west. It's a critical freight corridor, but it also has passenger rail. In the center of it. And so, we really are trying to help our partners think about how we bring infrastructure projects together and think multimodally.

LIU: Tom, I'm going to turn to you because I want to hear how it is that you're her second boss. Why does the business community care about infrastructure? And is there any other sort of transformative projects you want to highlight that Emily didn't mention.

KOTARAC: Sure. First, thanks for having me. And I'm really excited that Amy and I have like a really Chicago connection. Growing up, Rahm Emanuel used to say Chicago is the most American of American cities. And in the, you know, 80 plus neighborhoods, depending on your counting of where Chicago is, there is the most Chicago of all neighborhoods. And that's Bridgeport, where the White Sox play.

LIU: So, I grew up in Illinois, my father lives in Bridgeport, and Bridgeport's also the home of the whole Daly dynasty, right, so.

KOTARAC: So again, we're not going to not talk about politics, and we're talking about Chicago. But the history of the business community's engagement in transportation, land use, comprehensive planning is really deep. The Burnham and Bennett plan of Chicago was a product of the Commercial Club of Chicago. I'd like to think about it as enlightened self-interest. When the region is growing, that's good for business. It's good. It's good for national growth. And that legacy carried on. We at the Commercial Club played an important role in merging what had been two separate planning agencies that CMAP became. We used to do land use planning in one agency, and then transportation planning in another, and helped create legislation that produced CMAP.

So, it's something that we care a lot about. And I think you know, a seminal project that really speaks to that enlightened self-interest is the efforts that we carried out to expand O'Hare Airport, which had been constrained, very difficult to expand airports in cities and in regions. And in 1989, the civic committee created a small group of CEOs to promote and make the case for why growth at O'Hare is really, really important. It's important for talent. It's one of the most important things we have to retain and attract major business headquarters. And it's a huge job generator for the entire Midwest, not just for the Chicago region, but the entire Midwest. And it is something that we keep a close eye on and

are really excited about the growth in the terminals after we expanded the runways just some years ago.

LIU: Great. Councilman, I'm really glad that you can join us today.

KIEL: Glad to be here.

LIU: I hear you are from, hometown is La Crosse.

KIEL: La Crosse, Indiana, that's right.

LIU: What is the size, population size of La Crosse?

KIEL: 550 people or maybe 549 since I'm here right now.

LIU: So, I think it's really important to note that inside the Chicago metropolitan area is this is a bi-state region that is home to large cities, suburbs, and smaller communities or rural communities of which you represent. Before I ask you about sort of the vision of northwest or the challenges facing Northwest Indiana, tell me why as a council member and a county council member you I thought it was important to be part of a regional planning commission. And yeah.

KIEL: Yeah, so I can actually trace my involvement in our Metropolitan Planning Organization back to when I was on town council in La Crosse. My community hadn't been involved in any regional activities. They kind of just stayed away from that. We're about as far away from the center of the population in our region as you can get. And I felt it was important to get more connected and share resources and understanding with these other elected officials. And it's been very hugely beneficial really. For our community, we brought in additional grants that we would have never been able to bring in before, better understanding of what's going on in the whole region. To kind of frame the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission, it's three counties instead of your seven, and

instead of how many million, we have three-quarters of a million people from the shores of Lake Michigan to the banks of the Kankakee River. And yeah, that's our region.

LIU: And so, what are the big challenges or challenges facing your community, and what are the kind of regional projects that you guys are pursuing to address those?

KIEL: It's, I think it varies a lot by community really. You know, you have some of the industrialized cities that are closer to Chicago, like Gary or Hammond, that have really seen kind of like a deindustrialization. They have their own challenges. Then further out, there's communities that are rapidly expanding because of, you know, people moving further out into the suburbs. So, they're seeing like really fast growth and the challenges that come with that. It's really kind of a diverse picture around the region. So, our MPO is statutorily tasked with three different things, which is primarily transportation and then to a lesser extent, economic development and environmental matters. So those are our core areas.

LIU: Since you've got the mic and I want to ask a question to everybody here, is, you know, we want to understand the regional table, why it's important to think regionally, the economy is regional, and at the same time the region is composed of cities, towns, counties, neighborhoods. So, I'd be curious, how do you balance sort of the regional frame and regional priorities while being cognizant of hyper-local interests.

KIEL: I mean, within NURPSC, a lot of the projects, they're kind of grouped into two different, there's two different funding groups and the main way that it works is really just put them all in a room and you make them negotiate to figure out how the money's gonna get split, which is good for the group I'm in because it's small and it's very collegial with like five or six members competing for funding, but the other group, they are, I hear it's wild over there sometimes, but yeah. I mean there's a scoring criteria and they work together to figure out what is the most important thing for that surface transportation funding.

LIU: Erin, how does it work in Chicago?

KIEL: It's gotta be more political than that.

LIU: The rest of the Chicago area.

ALEMAN: Well, in many ways, it is. This is what regional agencies were set up to do. We are conveners, we are consensus builders, and it is a tough job because I don't report to one mayor, I report to many, and our county board chairs also play into that conversation as well. We have a data-driven process to really look at how we're allocating transportation resources because one of the things that we think we're really good at is understanding you know, what the highest priority is based on a variety of metrics, whether we're looking at the economy, whether we're looking at homes, or whether we are looking at congestion across our region. But the other way that we do this is through our direct assistance to communities. So, we're oftentimes providing technical assistance in a way that helps support communities get their goals achieved at the same time, and helping bring them along in this big regional conversation, so we aren't just sort of this like outlier government and nobody really knows what we are. So, we do a lot of that too.

LIU: So, I want to now pivot to the role of the federal government and explore the policy idea that both Brookings and the San Diego Policy Innovation Center released earlier this week, which is the importance or the opportunity to enact, design a regional block grant. You know what, Erin, I'm going to turn this question to you first, and then I want the others to weigh in. Walk us through your experience with, I think we talked about it in the prep call, how big an ambitious and complicated CREATE is. Walk us through your experience with current federal programs, what worked well, what doesn't, and would a regional block grant program help solve this?

ALEMAN: Okay. Well, the CREATE program is a partnership between the state of Illinois, city of Chicago, Cook County, our largest county in the region, all of the class one railroads. What happened was there were passenger trains and freight trains conflicting and really, we wanted to make sure that goods were able to get to market. That program has about 70 projects which are sort of making sure

that rail crossings don't happen, you're sort of building new bridges or underpasses or overpasses. About half of the projects are done to date. The biggest one is well underway.

It's a 75th Street corridor program and what it, you know, some of the successes that we've seen from the federal government is that in 2018 it received the largest infra grant to the region. About \$130 million, but the other remainder of the funds, about a half a million dollars, came from a local state, from the railroads, and so one of the things about competitive grants that we find valuable is it sometimes helps us bring other money to the table, but I think the other challenge is that it's been three, three-ish plus decades of this program, and we're only halfway through, and so that is because they've been really successful at applying for grants. But they've also had to apply for grants, because a half a billion dollars isn't something that we can come up with on an annual basis on our own. And so really, those are the complexities of, the way that the funding works right now is that the state has its own priorities, cities have their own priorities.

LIU: We're gonna come back and explore the state, but tell me then, does a block grant then to the region, would it help solve what you're talking about?

ALEMAN: It would help us with predictability, right? And I think that would also help us figure out, like, how can we allocate the resources in the most effective way to get things done, as opposed to hoping that we're going to receive a grant application, and it's competing against the rest of the nation.

LIU: I'm going to come to you. Councilman, I just want to now bring you in around the state piece. I think one of the arguments for a regional block grant is that most federal infrastructure dollars, whether it's road or water or surface transportation, goes directly – mostly goes to states versus regions. And even as Erin just mentioned, that competitive grants are administratively complicated, Right? I'm curious from your perspective, sitting in Northwest Indiana is why would a block grant be better for you versus what a state would normally do through their passage of the region?

KIEL: Well, there's probably a couple of points to hit on there. One is when you're competing for funding, you're trying to build momentum in a community or multiple communities, get all these people

together, then you're putting together an application, you submit it, you hope it gets accepted. And sometimes they don't. And now you've taken all this momentum and just brought it to a complete halt, which is kind of counterproductive. So, having block grants where you can then be like, okay, we wanna do these projects, these are important, and we know we already have the money to do it. It's a lot easier to get people together when you know that you actually have committed funding for it. And sometimes, you know, you compete for these grants and you don't get quite as much as you wanted. And now you're like, well, do we scale it back? What about these big promises we made? These are really challenging things to be in the middle of. As far as, like, the state's involvement, I think states sometimes, or probably pretty often, have different objectives than local units of government. I mean... They have a whole state to look out for, we have a region to look for, and sometimes those interests don't perfectly align. So, having the money directly going to regions is advantageous because we're able to actually spend it without having the state's interference in it necessarily.

LIU: And Tom, I wanted – what I wanted to ask you was there's a question that came from one of our audience members in Baltimore who wanted to know that as we reimagine the federal role with states and regions, is there is a real concern that we're going to see federal retrenchment, that there's going to be less federal funding overall, particularly because given there's an active debate right now about how to. The scale to which we might need to cut discretionary spending to make room for a tax bill. So, in that environment, what I would also say is even if we're going to reauthorize IIJA, it's not clear that the appropriators are going to match that ambition. So, I think what a lot of folks want to know is what is the role of public-private partnerships? There's always a sense the business community can help step in. And think through solutions to this fiscal gap or resources for these projects, what's your experience about whether or not there's a role for business in an era of public scarcity?

KOTARAC: Sure. So first, I'll put a plug in for the Brookings program that you mentioned, a big fan. We have an ad hoc group of ten of the largest CEO organizations based in the major cities we call ourselves the Metro Civic Leadership Alliance and this is really one of the things that we wanted the federal program to do is to get money to the big regions where really more than a third of the country's GDP is coming out of and I feel like in this last reauthorization it's sort of be careful what you ask for because the way to get there was through competitive grants. And some of those competitive grants

were really structured just for big cities. And we had six, probably six X of competitive programs relative to previous transportation bills actually whispered over to Erin, I was like, did we get one of those congestion grants? I couldn't remember. And that was a program that was helped, that was created by our two senators and really looking as a carrot, to stimulate some of the things that we're talking about of, if you're looking at congestion, solutions to that problem are going to be different in each of the big regions, what if you have funding out as a carrot and then really are sort of agnostic about how you solve it? Can that stimulate activity? We have so many competitive grant programs, can't even remember which one was where. So, if there's trend to formalize these sort of funds, I think it's important to concentrate them on the big metro regions where I think you get the biggest bang for the buck and also leave a lot of room for innovation and creativity and having the business community and other stakeholders come to the table with their solutions that right for that context and aren't prescribed.

LIU: That's great. That was a great plug for the block grant. Go back to my other question. Is, you know, are there in the absence of competitive grants or maybe a highly resourced block grant program, what is the role of a public-private partnership? What is the role? Because the civic committee has, as you said, since the Burnham plan has been involved in infrastructure planning for centuries. And we've always seen periods and ebbs and flows of federal public resources being available. So, we may be going into an ebb. Does the private sector have a role to play in partnering with regions on making sure these big infrastructure ambitions continue?

KOTARAC: It will foster that sort of innovation if not require it and force it. I think the other side of this is really a place where how big is that reduction? You can't have a role where you don't have federal funding. You're not going to have the capacity at states or in the private sector to handle that. You need a strong federal role. So, I think that it's important for the business community to make that argument to the capital and the administration that that's still an essential piece for our national growth. But if there's a small reduction, could that gap be made? I think so. You can help support different sort of things through user fees, et cetera. We've got a mixed sort of relationship and experience in the Chicago region with public private partnerships. The concession model is one that we were pioneers in, probably maybe moved a little too fast in certain circumstances, but I think we're

over that hangover. And the right piece for the feds is, again, to incentivize that while protecting both the public interest. And I think that we haven't really hit that mark yet. So, if there is a reduction, allowing for that creativity to happen with some reasonable checks is probably a good outcome of this re-auth.

LIU: I want to come back to the role of states, not only A, because regions obviously regularly work with their state as partners on a whole slew of policy areas, but also because in a bi-state region, you're always very cognizant of the role that the states can play in that way. I want ask two questions that actually came from the audience in advance of this meeting, So I want to get to them and by the way those questions came from Illinois and Indiana. One question was, how is the regional block grant proposal different from the surface transportation block grant that currently flows to states than to regions, I think? And then what ought to be the division of labor between states and regions and feds on transportation? Like, in particular, what are the characteristics of projects that might naturally make sense at the state level? And then, what is unique? What are the kind of projects that are really truly uniquely done by regions?

ALEMAN: So there's a – I think I should say it.

LIU: Okay, I know there were two questions in there. Which one do you want to take? How is this different from the surface transportation block grant program currently exists?

ALEMAN: I mean, I think what's different than the surface transportation blockgrant program, right, is really just like federal aid to infrastructure, right? And this idea of a regional block grant is bringing in sort of all of the other things that regions really care about, the local economy, how the housing market works, right. And so -

LIU: You're saying the block grant proposal goes beyond surface transportation.

ALEMAN: Goes beyond, right it helps you think bigger picture. And You know, at the end of the day, a road is just a road, but it's facilitating people and goods getting to the places that they need to go,

whether it's healthcare, whether it is family, whether it it's work. And so, I would suppose that a regional block grant would be helpful in us solving these bigger problems that are more multifaceted. And that to me is sort of the work that we're already doing, and many of my peers are across the country. And so that is a really effective way for us to be thinking about this. And then I think the other question was...

LIU: What's distinct, what's the right division of labor between states and regions, what projects are naturally suited for states, what products are naturally suited for regions? And that will help sort where funding goes.

ALEMAN: I think, initially, my brain goes to the fact that a safety fact of our region, which is that half of all fatalities happen on local roads. And they happen on roads that are 35 miles per hour. Now, that may seem a little wonky, but I think the same is true for lots of different topic areas as well, sectors, is that these problems are occurring at a much lower level than the state system. And so, we need to be able to think about that local, hyper-local dynamics that are going on. And that's what's different about regions.

KIEL: And I think what particularly makes regions well-equipped to deal with some of this is they have that hyper-local focus. You have elected officials who are in their communities and understand some of these problems and how they might be addressed. Whereas the state is looking at a much bigger picture. So, it's who has the expertise to handle it the best.

LIU: Tom, you want to add to that?

KOTARAC: Sure, I'd say on the STBG program, I know, right, there's a lot of acronyms. I mean, only by the grace of the state, you know, can the MPO program that. If I'm remembering my, you, know, sort of federal highway law right, the state could just go ahead and program that if they want, say, on a national highway system bridge and say thanks very much for the input. I think the block grant really helps build the institutional muscle for MPOs to grow into that place where they might be able to take on bigger and better things. Credit to Erin and CMAP, they're looking at the 290, the Eisenhower

expressway, the road that the Burnham plan really thought was the entry point to the city, also the road or interstate that had a heavy rail line built in its median. It's way past its useful life. I feel that the state's planning process was fairly stale in thinking about just reconstructing that in kind. The MPO stepped in and said, what can we do to raise the ambition of what this is? And we also partnered with them and grabbed one of our architect members, Jeannie Gang, to look at what a vision for that corridor can be. It's a once in a 60, 70-year opportunity to think about that corridor in a brand-new way, and I think having the MPO and that regional table leading that discussion, which is traditionally something the state would have done, produces a very different dynamic and is very much more in line with the sense of place than the state naturally is.

LIU: I'm --

KIEL: If I may add, I think it needs to be said that the federal funding has a convening effect for local governments. When you put a piece of pot of money out in front of them, it brings people to the table, it forces them to have conversations about how they can do things. And it also has --

LIU: And why is that better?

KIEL: It has an innovative effect.

LIU: Innovative effect, not just convening.

KIEL: Yeah, it forces local governments to be thinking about what the problems are and how they might go about solving them. One of the things that I've learned from being involved in the National Association of Regional Councils is that there's a lot of different units, or a lot different MPOs that have different approaches and different scopes of how many things they deal with in their community. If you give them the funding and you convene these local units of government, they can come up with some really innovative solutions for problems. And when it's done at a broader regional scale, it's usually better than what any one community can do by themselves.

LIU: Well said. I'm going to turn to, I'm watching the clock, and we do need to turn to audience questions in just a moment, but I just want to squeeze in one other question, actually two, we'll see, maybe keep your answers really tight. There was a question that came from the audience also in advance of this meeting that I think is a topic that we haven't touched on, which is public transit. There's actually quite a few small cities and large city audience members that wrote in wanting to understand in all of this. How do we make sure that the public transit system remains solvent, viable, vibrant? What are your thoughts on that? In 30 seconds?

ALEMAN: Agreed?

KIEL: It can be solved in 30 seconds.

LIU: Is that real, I don't know.

ALEMAN: It's critical,

LIU: Because no one's raised public transit in all of this yet.

ALEMAN: Well, that's a whole other panel that could take all day.

LIU: I know, I know. That's true, that true.

ALEMAN: But as we have an aging population, right, we're going to have to address things differently. As we think about sort of workforce challenges and getting people to jobs, and the center city is no longer the only place people go to work, we need to think about transportation alternatives for people to get there. And so, I think that's great space for our regional agencies to also play sort of that local role in convening and understanding where transit needs to be.

LIU: Good answer that the region is the better way to equip that. Last question to the group and then I'm going to open up to everyone, so please get your questions ready, which is, let's just go back to

the federal moment. Given your reflections today, what would you like to see in a federal reauthorization bill? Tom?

KOTARAC: I mean, I think that funding level that we have been living underneath for the last few years is really critical and has helped a lot. I think the other part of the reauthorization, bipartisan infrastructure law has been looking at all things, not just I think one of the really if this would be bad, if this just became the old highway bill. You know, really the bipartisan infrastructure law looked at not just all asset classes, but looked at the environment, looked at housing, looked at energy. I think we really have a job to sell that and to really speak to how that worked well. Because we're still living through it, but man, that just opened up a whole lot of possibilities to solve a lot of regional problems and spur growth. And if we go back to the old modal silos and just do transit gets this, highways get this, I think will be missing a huge opportunity of something that we were really successful in doing in the last one.

ALEMAN: I'm going to second that.

KIEL: I'll third it, but I'll add also that I think, I would tell federal legislators, stability is the name of the game here for. It takes a lot of energy to steer our ships locally with, we're trying to move a region with millions of people in a certain direction. When federal decisions are changing on a frequent basis, it makes it difficult for us to set the course and stick with it. And then you get results that maybe aren't quite as desirable because we're changing course all the time and trying to interpret what's gonna happen next. Maybe we're not willing to take risks because we don't know if that funding is going to be there. Stability is the name of the game.

LIU: Well, I hope everyone listens because there is an active conversation in Washington about how federal programs can be delivered better. And I think you guys have really reintroduced some really great ideas. Okay. It's your turn. Any questions from the audience? Yes, sir, and can you introduce yourself?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you. My name is Carter. I work at Cardinal Infrastructure, an advocacy firm here in D.C. One operational question and then a policy question. First, at what point is there almost like too much local collaboration where there's not one decision maker who can come in and just say, like, this is what we're doing. This is a good project. Everyone kind of step aside. I know in Chicago you got like Cook County, RTA, the city, everybody else.

KOTARAC: Sure, I can take that and give you a really good example. Transit is outrageously important for the Chicago region and big metros and we are in the middle of a conversation really based on 40 plus years of living through a structure of our transit agencies where they're not incentivized to work together. Just two examples, for example, pace is our suburban bus operator, CTA, obviously has a very big bus operation. Both of them have a state mandate, but also are pursuing electrification in their fleets, doing them completely separate. And we're really missing out on the economies of scale. CTA and PACE also are currently doing their bus redesigns, looking at how to deal with a post-COVID environment and people are, that's great. Arguably the first time both of them are doing it in decades. They both hired the same consultant by accident and are doing that work separately. There's a place where that individualized bespoke approach is really hurting a network benefit for the broader region and it's something that the General Assembly is actively thinking about based on work that CMAP had done. They spent a year and a half, 17,000 hours of study and research looking at that and how to structure that the right way and we're hopeful that something will come out that'll fix some of those problems.

LIU: Other questions? I saw another hand up.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you. I'm with the city of Annapolis and I chair a committee with Baltimore's MPO. One of the realities I've noticed is that the MPOs can take projects up to a 30% design and then the regional project gets handed off to all of the multiple parties that benefit from that project. I am just kind of curious about your thoughts on whether there's economy of capacity that if the MPO were to continue managing that project, take it off the hands of the local governments. So, it's maybe more a question for the MPO. But to me, it seems like that capacity could be really beneficial to all of the various parties.

ALEMAN: Yeah, I think that there are places where that definitely makes a lot of sense in Chicago. We don't actually do any sort of preliminary engineering. We are supporting our local governments with the funding to do the preliminary engineering, but we do try to stick, participate in all of the technical advisory committees so that we're helping sort of bring that guiding voice. You know, at the end of the day, I think there is a big role for us to continue to think about what makes sense per region, whether it's getting involved in sort of more of engineering. I'll say for us, our first foray is really bringing IDOT and CTA to the table on the 290 project because they were designing two separates, you know, they both did two separate EISs for both of those projects and they weren't thinking about them together. And so, again, I think it's a little bit, it's dynamic is I guess what I'm trying to say here.

KIEL: I would say absolutely, being able to tap into the resources of the MPO. I can tell you, coming from a town of 550, we do not have someone who just specializes in federal grants, and that might have been me, but it definitely helps to have expertise coming from other areas.

LIU: Any other questions? Oh, one in the back.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes, good morning. Long time Chicago resident here, although it's been a while since I've lived in Chicago. When we use the term infrastructure, are we referring specifically to hard infrastructure? In other words, transit, ports, logistics, and so on. Or are we including digital infrastructure these days too? In other words, I remember years ago, Chicago was named as one of the biggest internet transit points in the world. And so, is digital infrastructure a focus of what you're doing as well?

ALEMAN: I know that I have peers that digital infrastructure is part of their purview and some of the things that they're getting into, the BEAD Act funding and making sure that communities have accessible wi-fi and internet speeds. In Chicago, we aren't necessarily in that conversation, but I don't think it's a stretch for us to think about all of the different layers of infrastructure. The challenge really is the funding availability. And so, again, thinking about this idea of a regional block grant. Would allow us to solve the region's most pressing issues. So, if for Chicago there wasn't somebody in the

region taking care of that, that could rise to a priority issue. Water again is another thing that we're doing a lot of work around in our region, flooding. So, I think again it probably is everything, but it's just unique by sort of the history of the agencies in every region.

LIU: Any other questions?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, a question and a suggestion. My name is Sandra Pinal. I work for the Federal Cybersecurity Infrastructure Security Agency, but I'm a regional planner by practice and scholarship as well and also used to work for Metropolitan Council in Twin Cities. So anyway, I've been thinking about regionalism for a very long time and tried to bring that to CISA because one of my questions is, are you even familiar, because we don't always tie together the right people with the right activity. Are you familiar with our regional resiliency assessment that was done on the water and cyber systems in the Chicago area a couple of years ago?

ALEMAN: I am not, personally, but that doesn't mean my staff isn't. But no, it's a good flag for us, too.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Because one of the challenges we have is we do these assessments and then they don't always get implemented by the right people because they're often done with emergency managers and not with regional planners.

ALEMAN: Bring them to the regional planners. We're going to make that a resource.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: And so, the comment or suggestion I wanted to offer is we also, in addition to those assessments, we have something called the regional resiliency assessment or regional resiliency planning framework. And we're finding and using it with some regions, especially some rural regions, that it's a way to think through the interdependencies, that your critical regional and local services depend on communications, energy, et cetera. We weren't at the table always with the IJJA because we weren't a funding agency, right? We were expertise trying to offer these capabilities to think about infrastructure differently to our partners. So, I would love to get some information to some

of you about that. I'm retiring, so it won't involve me, but I would love to get that information to some of you for you to consider.

LIU: Okay, thank you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Much. Maybe when the next reauthorization comes. Speaking personally.

LIU: We are going to have to wrap and what I was going to say is we're in an environment right now not only because we're, in a period of enormous federal policy change, but also, I think part of the policy change is an increasing reliance and turn to the states and states' rights. And so, what we heard today from these leaders is really the importance of not forgetting the power of regional knowledge, regional proximity to local residents in local businesses. Their effectiveness to solve problems at a time when the whole U.S. economy and global economy is truly regionally organized. So please join me in thanking our colleagues from Chicago, Northwest Indiana for this conversation.

* * * * *

TOMER: Good morning, everyone. First of all, thank you again for being here, and thank you for braving the standing room only element. Again, you have me to blame for it, so I just want to be really clear if you're angry at the end of this. But again, that is, I think, a good sign for during infrastructure week, how much the regional conversation really matters. Not just here in federal Washington, but really around the country. It's been a unique. It's been a unique period for investment in a kind of capital investment framework. Really, we deserve to give, if Congress is the representation of all of us, we all deserve to get ourselves, I think, credit for making investments in America, right? We've been waiting for this for quite a long time.

But I think what the theme we heard from the last panel and I think we'll transition into here, too, is that that job is never done. Tom actually kind of said it that way. And so, I think what we. What we're looking for, and I'm hoping you all will hear, and I will learn myself too, sitting in this front row seat, is how some of the needs and the challenges, even when we first hear from folks in the same region, often actually there's gonna be a lot of similarities from folks representing different ones too, right? So,

let me start by introducing to my left, Caroline Smith is the Assistant Chief Administrative Officer for the County of San Diego and a long-time colleague. So really nice to see you. Thank you for making the trip both to you and Emily. We know it's a far one. And then to her left is Greg Stuart, the Executive Director of the Broward Metropolitan Planning Organization. For those of a certain age or Floridians like me, that means Fort Lauderdale and the greater environs. And you're like, oh, right, right. Okay, I know where that is. Both of them, just to stay out loud, this will kind of be in my somewhat lead answering a bit of my own question, but I get in front of it. I think it's important for folks to know this, even if they say it themselves. For Caroline, who the county, it only employs 20,000 people, so it's not a large organization at all, and they are serving 3.3 million people. And again, I want to let that sink in, right? That is, happens to be also the jurisdictions of the Metropolitan Plan, Metropolitan Statistical Area, also the MPO. But again, 3.3 million people living in one county. Greg, they are really falling behind in Broward. Of course, they're growing, so that's weird to say it that way. They only serve two million people. So again, these are single jurisdictions at a county scale. They also have their municipal partners, and we'll probably hear about even the count of that, what that work is like. But these are massive entities.

And we may think of them as single jurisdictions, and they in fact are, and they have certain administrative responsibilities there, but they themselves, different than the kind of, to Amy's first question, think about how do you make sure you coordinate, they themselves are a table, right, for their respective counties. So, where I wanna kind of start the conversation today. In your own words, introduce your counties, but also how do you think about bringing people together? What is that kind of, let's say weekly, monthly, how does the table sit? How do you bring those municipalities together? Give some character to everyone here about what that looks like.

SMITH: Sure. So, thank you so much for the tee up. And yeah, so counties in California are a little interesting. Um, we are the large geographic area. The favorite talking point of our elected officials is we're roughly the size of the state of Connecticut, give or take a give or take 1000 square miles or so, um, and similar size and population. So, and one of the things you don't think about when you think of San Diego is we have a very large rural area. Obviously, you think the city of San Diego which is about 1.3 and some change, million of our 3.3 million. So, we have 2 million people that we serve that

do not live within the city of San Diego and more than half a million of them live in our rural communities. That is in some cases, a two-and-a-half-hour drive from the city of San Diego from the municipal airport or the regional airport.

So, it's a, and agriculture is a is probably our fifth-ish I think at this point, largest industry at about a billion dollars. So those are things you don't think about when you think of San Diego. You think the tourism, you probably think Navy town, the military and on life sciences, biotech, all of those things are true. But there's a lot of things you don't think about and the county being the regional municipal, only municipal government for those rural areas, the collection of towns that are out there that aren't served by a city council and mayor means that we wear both hats. Also, in California, counties are the provider of all health and social services. So, we have the public health responsibility, we have all of the social services, all of jails, the sheriff's department, district attorney and things. But I bring that up because you talk about tables. Really, we got a lot better during COVID. There are not a ton of silver linings that came out of that timeframe, but one of them is as the public health entity, we had to reach partners that we had never reached before. So there had been individual touch points as the project required or as the topic required, but there had really never been a tremendous amount of cross-regional work.

And once the federal funding came, you know, for the broad things from COVID, and then we had the IJJA, it really became a necessity that we worked together better than we had before. We had a lot of lessons learned coming into that. And so, it was the opportunity to create new spaces for conversations. So, coming out of COVID and into the IJJA is really where I think as a region, San Diego got better. And a shout out to my colleagues at the city of San Diego who had said, we really need to be better prepared as a region to stop cannibalizing each other's efforts because we for the covid we were all in it together um and when we realized then with the one voice as a regent we were significantly more powerful than eight with 18 cities um and the county and then all of our respective transit agencies and things like that um If we're going to work together, the impact we can make on the region is significantly better than if we each only do our best project.

TOMER: That's great, and Health and Human Services, I'm sure you have nothing else you're thinking about while you're in Washington right now. The, that's a DC joke. Greg, I want to throw it to you. Again, I partially make that joke about Fort Lauderdale because the whole point is you're much more than Fort Lauderdale, right? So, let's, again, give us the character. What is Broward County like? How do you then, versus kind of yours, not versus, but like your colleague here, right, work with the county, but who's separate, right, as an MPO.

STUART: And actually, we're actually very similar to San Diego in a lot of the setups, because our Human Services and all that is actually the same thing, runs through the county. We actually have about seven and a half million people in my region. There's 99 local governments, there's 31 in Broward, and so you have a lot of conversations. The county itself is only 13,000 people of two million, so their level of responsibility is a local government provider. Is actually really limited. And so, it's kind of very fascinating. When I first got there 1,000 years ago, my primary job was to take the 800,000 residents that were unincorporated and put them in cities and not make any city more than 150,000 people. So really interesting in the way we put our structures together. And I can blame myself on doing the job that I was given to the discourse that has happened over the years.

Having that many local governments in your area and coordinating with Miami-Dade and Palm Beach counties is a really unique thing. You have a port, we have a port. Port Everglades is phenomenal. If you ever get on a cruise ship, you're gonna go out there. But the number one thing that comes through Port Everglades, and I'm hoping each one of you are wearing this today, is underwear. That actually is our number one import, and cotton is the one of the number one exports. It's really fascinating to know that most of our nation's things that we all have, and we're all wearing, hopefully, is actually something that comes into Fort Lauderdale and then is distributed out on the rail system. But that said, the gantry cranes that are in Fort Lauderdale are also in Miami and also in the Port of Palm Beach. And that's the investment coordination, and that through our economic development side, that is so pivotal because we, like Chicago, are feeding off of each other, and you can't do that to be successful.

And so, we have a convening, and I think Erin, you did a great representation on what we do as MPOs. It's convening different groups together. Our business chambers, each county has their own. Each county has its own healthcare. Each county... Bringing everybody together and having them talk to each other and then have all the cities talk to each other is a huge lift. What we've seen out of IJJA, which is something that was part of that, how do we not kill each other anymore, is actually one of the things that I kind of pride our organization on because we brought everybody together for things that we don't need or do, and so it was a matter of making sure that that coordination was happening.

Lucky to have all the agriculture when we were kids. Well, I'm a little bit older than you, but you know Broward actually had a very robust tomato and green pepper or winter vegetables. We don't have that anymore. We have single-family homes and townhouses and golf courses. So that said the agricultural side of our world has changed and just to give you kind of a lay of the land in Broward, one third of the county is built, two thirds of the county is wetland and it's preserved. So, we're also in a little bit different area than my friends in San Diego and San Diego County. We can't build any more single-family or multi-family homes on land that has never been touched before. There is no beautiful pieces of property that you can say, this has been untouched and I'm going to put really portly homes. They're not going to be put in a big community there. They don't have that ability. So, through our agencies and our land use is done in another place. We're always busy trying to coordinate with the development community as well to find places to put housing.

And that then drives our transportation system. And where does the transportation system and then how do you tie the hotels on the beach to the workers that can't afford to live in Fort Lauderdale? Lots of conversation, looking forward to having it today. But one of the similarities that I really love about San Diego and San Diego County is they are the single county area, and we do a lot of cross-pollination. You would never believe it, but the two most beautiful places on earth is San Diego and Fort Lauderdale.

TOMER: Yeah, and Sarasota County, too. I'm deeply offended as a Floridian here. You've claimed. But yes, Sarasota County actually used to smell like oranges, to your point. That's a bygone era.

STUART: It was amazing.

TOMER: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Florida, different place then. Caroline, let me throw it to you. We've known each other for a while to expand the acronym soup in theme for DC, the CEDS, the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy. This was something that both you've owned, the county has taken on. But in some ways, I want to kind of transition to this strategy here, something we're obsessed with at Brookings Metro. I know a lot of our local and regional colleagues in DC are too, which is that infrastructure is not just stuff, it's powered by outcomes you're trying to achieve.

So, can you speak to how the county, both for those folks you serve directly, how you can convene the 18 municipalities, right? Around larger economic strategies that you're trying to achieve, and then Greg, I wanna go to you on how those are probably a little bit different for you all, but how you all put those into practice on the infrastructure side. But let me start with you. What does San Diego want to achieve? How do you come up with those ideas and then thinking about how those translate into big bold visions?

SMITH: So, thank you for that. So, and San Diego as a region and as a county are pretty new to the CEDS process at 2022. A previous staff on my county journey, I was the director of our Office of Economic Development and Government Affairs. And when it really, that was having a CEDs was driven by our community partners that came to our elected officials at the time and said. The county should own the CEDs, the county should have a CED. We are missing out on so much federal money because you all have not done this. And really our local, we have three different economic development councils. We have, I think, four different chambers in various regions, obviously, with being a large county. And it was really just too big of a project for any one entity to take on, from a staff time, from an expertise.

And that wasn't true of the county. As you mentioned, we have 20,000 people, entire data unit. It was not hard for us to take one. So, as we were building out our economic development portfolio, it was gathering all those municipalities, all of those partners, because the partners in rural East County had very different needs than our South Bay, which is our folks, we are a bi-national community. The Cali-

Baha region is a significant economic driver on both sides of the border. And so. What their needs were very different than from our North County who borders Orange County and Riverside. So other counties in California, for those of you that haven't been there, Disneyland, think that. And so that's what's North. And so really, how do we combine those things into something that is regional, when those needs are so different?

And how do prioritize. The needs of a region that are so vast. And so that was really the work that we did with all of the community partners and sitting down to say what benefits the region as a whole, knowing that we have these microcosms. And really quite frankly, the driver is the cost of living. I mean, living in San Diego is our, I think this was the first year, our median home price, this includes condos that are an hour and a half away from the ocean. Our median home prices more than a million dollars. And so even our life sciences and biotech, which have traditionally been our high wage job earners, those folks don't even make a single income is not enough to buy even a condo in San Diego. And so how do we not only sustain the industries we already have, but drive the industries we're trying to grow when the people who work in those jobs can't afford to live in San Diego?

And so that really was the crux of the drive. And back to the infrastructure, the, you know, the cost of gas is astronomical in San Diego. And so, yeah, and so how can they even, if they can't even afford a condo an hour and a half from the beach, how do they get to their job downtown when that network of transit doesn't connect them? And so that's really the planning that we've done around how we prioritize not just those industries, but how we can help those industries either grow their foothold or gain a foothold in the region.

TOMER: I want to ask you a quick follow-up before I go to you, Greg. I think housing affordability, you're talking to a lot of folks who live in greater DC. They understand housing affordability issues. Delivering real estate development, particularly on the residential side, that's not really government's job, at least in the United States in almost all ways. It doesn't need to be that way, but that's a different panel some other day. With the current setup though, how did you all think about translating that housing affordability need into what actually government delivers though? So, in other words, in

particular at those table, how did your parse that from something that really came up and it's pretty self-evident when you spend time out there, into okay, what can we do as government though?

SMITH: Right. And it really comes down to alleviating the pressure at the lower thresholds, right? Like we can't. Build with public dollars, middle income housing, but can we alleviate the pressure of where we're driving those middle-income families into our traditionally more lower income neighborhoods? How do we work through creating various levels of affordable housing to ease that pressure and that supply chain management? So that has been where we didn't quite have the nexus before that affordable housing and low-income housing lived in a very different part of our county. We've had to weave them into the conversation because the only way we can relieve the pressure valve, and I will say we've. It takes time, right? It takes a lot of time to get those projects funded and built and people moved into them. But that has to be, we can't let our foot off the gas because it creates pressures in those middle-income residential neighborhoods.

TOMER: Yeah, that's great. And I love how land use was part of that, both those answers there. Greg, I'll throw it to you. I'm sure housing affordability is an issue in southeast Florida. But what other issues are coming? You talked about, it's such a fascinating story about like, now there's municipalities where there wasn't. And, I grew up in an unincorporated county, so I really do understand this a little bit. But now that when those municipalities come to your table, what are the kind of issues that they are already bringing with them? And then think about, okay, how do we address them, at least with our kind of our public capital investment opportunities.

STUART: Because of the environments and the relocation, people come to Southeast Florida from different places. Whether you're coming from South and Central America, Europe, or Chicago, or Pittsburgh, or New York, the driving skills are not necessarily the same to handle the roadways we've developed. And we really have beautiful roads. I mean, I'm going to tell you that. They're nice and wide, and the travel lanes are about 11 foot wide, sometimes 12. There's areas where they're 14 foot, because you know, people like to go like this and like that. And they may be on prescription drugs while they're driving. So, safety is actually one of the...

TOMER: Florida, everybody.

STUART: I say that in jest, but realistically that is an issue. Safety is actually the number one thing that you hear, whether it's a city with 30,000 people or a city of 100,000, they go, how many more fatalities can we have? When the sheriff of our county is run over by a car while he's jogging, you know you might have a problem. So, our side, we have huge amounts of fatalities in our area because of vehicular-pedestrian, vehicular-bicycle and about seven, eight years ago we started investing a lot in bicycle lanes and things because we started mapping out where fatalities were happening and how they were happening, and why. And each of the cities came to us and said, we want you to do something about this. Our fatality rate has gone way down.

And I can, through performance measures, show you. Hey, we put these investments in, the federal investments, and this has actually saved so many lives. So how much is a life worth, a million, two million dollars? How much is it, how much tax revenue does that person generate? I hate to be cold, but that's actually what this is. And so, we actually have done what we needed to do to actually bring that grade down. That said, facilitating that conversation with 31 local governments is actually a very big challenge. Because one city may have an issue with a traffic light, another city may have an issue with the traffic backing up off of the interstate highway, another city might want to have access to the turnpike. The bus system does a really good robust job of providing access for our folks that need to get to jobs that aren't making money. Two thirds of your income in Broward goes to housing and transportation costs. Two thirds. So, I mean, it's hard to raise a family on that, even when we have families. So, you know, the bigger picture with that is you might have two or three different jobs. That is part of that transportation solution side and the infrastructure that we need to put in. And I haven't even hit on flooding.

TOMER: Oh gosh, yeah, so I want to stay really quick before I go to another question here. Greg, with you on, I want to stay on housing affordability a little bit because you most speak to this and again, I think this is really one of our biggest national challenges but it comes to ground in places. You mentioned something really unique which is important for folks to recognize. We have this in a lot of our high growth, frankly, high productivity markets where they don't have land available anymore.

Florida, unlike a lot of other places, does not have the same kind of urban anchors that we think about like a Chicago or a New York, even Seattle, San Francisco. So how have folks responded to the potential solutions to saying no, no, there is no more land. We need to go up if we wanna keep adding people.

STUART: Local governments typically do not, and I use the term with single-family homes as an endangered species in our area. They really actually are. And so, we've been focusing on our commercial corridors and underutilized commercial corridors and trying to move housing into that area. Our legislature, in their infinite wisdom, removed the local government's control on commercial properties converting into residential as long as 30 percent. Is affordable housing. My county, in its wisdom, took \$50 million a year and provides that incentive to developers to build on these properties. Really kind of interesting thing. But some of the locals don't want that type of density. That changes. Fear is a big thing. So, having examples of what that could look like has really helped.

And I know that in California they have something similar where they want you to build housing everywhere. So, the bigger... The bigger picture with this is the market has responded. The developers have come in. We spend a lot of time with developers. I mean, we really do. We run traffic models. We do a lot things here. Here's the exemptions. Here's a way to buy down your cost. And we put in infrastructure around developments to help assist to make it a 15-minute walk. And basically, because of the diffused downtown situation we have, all of our jobs are everywhere. So, our roads work. In and out at the same capacity all day long, and there's no real rush hour because it's all going in all different directions. So, the efficiency of the roadway network is wonderful. We're using all of it, the capacity. There's no reverse, reversible lanes don't work.

So, we actually have that reality. So, you tie all that back in from the economic development spectrum because we've done really well at attracting businesses. We have an employment sector. That there aren't enough jobs, we're at like less than 2% unemployment rate, and so we need more people. By the way, another, we can talk about that for days. So, bringing in folks to work there is important, the labor jobs are actually not bad, the salaries are fairly competitive, they're not as great as San Diego, but the salaries aren't that low either. So, you have a really interesting dynamic that you have to deal

with. But the local governments control over the land use side because the land-use and zoning is at a local level. That by itself is a whole other conversation we have at my board.

And the cities, what I like about what happens at an MPO meeting is we're talking about transportation, but Parkland may have a, who doesn't want to increase zoning, basically may have conversation with Coral Springs, their neighbors. And it's like, well, can you actually increase zoning here because we need... More folks to help our facilities, and they actually get along and they talk to each other about it. It's not necessarily, but they would have no place to have that convening factor. And that's where our Metropolitan Planning Organization actually plays a super large role in making sure that locals are coordinated, which helps us with the federal dollars.

TOMER: Yeah, great. This is a great transition. You didn't say state yet, so I want to start with you, Caroline, because I think there's this implication we heard on the last panel. Tom is a veteran of D.C. And local politics. I think we heard it there. We hear it from other folks. This is really important, which is an implication in federal Washington. Well, the next level down is states, and they know what's happening in communities. And so, we've got right both whatever the local flavor of politics is, but I think it's safe to say we have a red state and a blue state here in terms of local leadership. But let me ask you a simple question, but please expand on your answer. Does your state, not because they're anti-San Diego, I'm saying, but do they really know what's happening in communities at a local level? Yeah, your face already answered. Tell them though, you were kinda looking at me.

SMITH: Well, and it's I mean, California is obviously massive, right? And San Diego is the bottom of geographically the bottom of the state, right. So even our legislators that live there, you know, they travel back and forth to Sacramento and they can bring their stories. But really, there's not a lot of visibility because we're so far away from the capital. The other thing is L.A. is a state unto itself. And so, when it comes down to, you know, even federal dollars that come through the state, we're competing with L.A. And that's incredibly difficult to do. They're much larger. They alone as a county have the majority of the state legislators, both houses, by a long way. And then we also then, the second choice is usually the Bay Area, the San Francisco Bay Area.

And it's not that their needs aren't important. They are just vastly different than that of San Diego. And so, when we're, we don't just have to make the case for what San Diego needs, but we also have to compete with those much larger jurisdictions with significantly more political firepower and their tremendous amount of needs. And so really, that's what makes it difficult because it's difficult to tell the story and compare ourselves to L. A. Because we don't we don't look the same. We don't have the same needs. Our infrastructure needs are not the same, and so that's been a problem also, because you know, when the federal money flows through the states, the state also wants to put their own flavor on it. And we have a lot of rules in California about how you hand things down.

So, you know we see federal dollars available. We look at our project list. We looked at the things we've worked with our regional partners on prioritizing, and we think, okay, we have the projects that will fit these funds and then they come to the state and state puts their own flavor on the requirements and then their own timeline. And it takes them a year to get there. No fowl. And so now we're a year and a half behind and we have two sets of strings and now all of a sudden, our project doesn't quite match as much. And oh, by the way, we're also competing with L.A. for the for the dollars. And so, now we have to pick a project that maybe wasn't first on our list and wasn't maybe even first in our needs, right? Like as you all know well from planning, sometimes there's a trickledown effect. We have to get one done before we can move to project two, before we could do project three. We don't have the money for one. Do we fund three? Well, no, that doesn't make any sense. And so, then we're scrambling to find a project to shoehorn in that fits the funding requirements when it's really not what's best for the community in general. And that is a really difficult process to walk legislators through or even state administrators as they're writing those grant requirements or funding requirements. And timelines for audits and things like that and then sometimes we just give up. Because we're never going to have the project that's going to meet the ideals

TOMER: That was amazing, first of all. And I really mean it. For folks to hear what the actual process looks like in a very condensed period of time. And I want to emphasize two things really quick, and then Greg, it's gonna basically be the same question, is, number one, a major county official, of a major, major county, official yourself, but also in a major county, just said they gave up. I mean, that's a tragedy in America, so I feel safe even as moderator putting that comment out there. Second is that

that was weird, uh, in a federal conversation, wait, the states can also make things longer yet we often blame the localities for making it take...? That was really weird that you slid but in there really quick.

SMITH: We do have our own level of bureaucracy, I will not --

TOMER: Interesting that also running things through states for investments in places and they take longer. That's really, I'm being sarcastic, but that is a really important thing to note here because the tenor of the DC conversation for too long has really been that no, if you give it to the states, everything will be quicker. But we have to invest in communities, but we're not going to them directly. We're actually creating an extra layer there. Greg, let's talk to you. You can touch on the red state element if you want, but you don't need to. What I'm interested in is how you all may have ideas of what you want to do, but Tallahassee may not fully understand that and frankly may make your life harder. And how have you, because I think I might know part of your answer, how have you responded innovatively to make sure you can do what you can?

STUART: First, I want to say California and Florida have very similar situations, red or blue, it doesn't matter. The Tallahassee folks up there are putting on ears on all of the money that comes from Washington. This is reality. Even on earmarks, until we started getting direct funding to our MPO, they were actually going through Tallahassee, getting into the Florida Department of Transportation, and getting into the work program. The work program is five years, so they come in. What I facetiously call the sixth year, and then finally it gets in the five years, and then the third year there's engineering, and then in the first year, hey, you get to start construction. Well, you know what? My elected official that lobbied for that up in Washington or in Tallahassee, they're gone. And their successor, whether they lost office or didn't, will be at that groundbreaking.

And then the project gets, well, do we really need to do this project? It's not one of my priorities. That's the scary part, and which is where we've kind of, and this is from experience, we put the process on its head. Our legislative delegation here in Washington was very successful at getting a whole bunch of earmarks. They assigned those earmarks to the MPO. The MPO created an organization to deliver

those projects. My partners at the Florida Department of Transportation was like, oh, we don't like that, that's getting past our process, our tip. The way things are supposed to work, but we're getting the projects in the ground faster. Right now, I have three projects under construction that we got the funding for last year. Now, you tell me where else in the world, in the United States anyway, that that's happening. And it's because we kind of looked at a problem and said, how do we address this? How do we get this done?

It happened because we got all the cities and the county and all the business, all the businesses, communities, everybody lined up in a room and said, how are we going to deliver a surtax? Because we did a penny surtax that raises \$740 million a year, we were trying to figure out how to deliver those projects because that's a lot of money to pull through a very small place to push things through. And then we added, well, what if we do this? And then my board said, go forward and create this entity. We did a study, looked at all 31 cities, and realized that they could not deliver federal projects on their own because each one of them might get an award every five years. So, their engineering department doesn't have the ability, they don't have the capacity, they do not know how to administer all the ears that come out of Washington, let alone the years come out of Tallahassee. Created an entity called the Metropolitan Transportation Construction and Engineering Collaborative. And they have been delivering projects. But it's the same people over and over during the federal process and paperwork. So, whether you're --

TOMER: You're sharing staffing resources.

STUART: Correct, and that actually allows us to at least have project delivery. And so, if there was direct funding, and if we go there, we would be able to, and 31 cities is a lot of places, 99 cities, even more, but we have a model. And that model does work, and it's proven. Again, let's go back to performance standards. We can prove it by performance. And so, you know, if the legislature goes forward here in Washington, and there's a new bill, and there's an opt-in provision. We would definitely be opting in because my local governments can deliver things, we just have to provide them the mechanism.

TOMER: That's great. I want to ask one more question, and then depending on our time, and just so folks know, I'm always so really candid. So, I'm making eyes with Christa because that is the operation of DC is, can the congressman make it, right? So, if all of a sudden, we're like, oh, we've got to go, that's what is happening, And I'm sure you're eager to hear from him too. So, speaking of the congressmen, let's, and where you ended to, let us talk about Congress. Emily, I think, spoke eloquently at the beginning about the challenges of trying to compete for federal grants, you obviously share a home region, although not an employer, if you will. Let me ask, at least start with you, Caroline, what's it been like, almost in a, really showing the story, right, rather than just, oh, we compete for this grant, but what has it been in a relatively short answer from 2021 to kind of now on being like, oh, there's this promise of dollars.

What's that process been like actually getting them in the door, both for the county, and of course, right, you kind of oversee the transit agency too, right? So, folks, no. But then also with your other municipal partners, right. Who've probably come to you for resources, staffing help, whatever it might be. What's the process actually been like, and I think how much can you show correlators with our Chicago colleagues from before?

SMITH: Yeah, certainly can identify with them very closely on the collaboration aspect. And I think that's at least and especially for our local congressional delegation. That's been incredibly helpful because they have been very receptive to the story. We've been able to tell once we started to work together and then you start to get some of those winds under your belt and some of those dollars in that really make a difference. You start to see the investment in the community and what that does for the region. It's really helped us to tell the story and really kind of frame the need around a regional aspect rather than just taking one project at a time, or working on, and I think for the region, right, like the best project that we all agreed on, the project that needed the most when we were looking at IJJA advocacy was not something that the county owned. And we all, as regional partners, had to step back and say, the LOSSAN corridor, if you've ever been to Southern California, there is...

TOMER: But what is the LOSSAN corridor?

SMITH: I'm about to tell you, it is one train track that runs from L.A. through Orange County down to San Diego all the way to Mexico that portion through San Diego. We now have some double tracking, but was a single track. And so, all of the cars that come into the point port of San Diego is there's only one rail line that takes you all the out of San Diego to the rest of the country. So that's moving people. That's moving goods and services. It's a lovely scenic route that grows right across, goes right across beautiful bluffs over the ocean that are crumbling into the sea. And so, safety issues. So, because of that single track, when there's erosion after storms, the entire rail line shuts down. So, there's no rail system when that happens from Orange County to San Diego.

TOMER: That's like Interstate 95, if you will, on the East Coast for language, just stopping effects.

SMITH: Right? No goods, no people commuting down from Orange County via rail. And so, um, and so we as a region, obviously that as I'm saying it, it sounds obvious that we were around the table, like, yes, this is the number one priority on behalf of the region, but that takes a lot of people to step back and say, my thing is not going to be number one that, that has my CEO on it with my elected official signature. We all have to support the things that are going to move forward as a region. And we collectively agreed to do that. Um, and, and I think it's and making the case for our congressional delegation who have been wonderful champions for us. And I don't mean to, I say the state doesn't know, our state delegation as well, because then they've also been able to leverage those federal dollars from additional state dollars. We've had a tremendous amount of state investments into the same infrastructure projects. That really is what helps get those things across the finish line.

TOMER: I'd love to ask a blunt question. You can try to, you may dodge it. I will not be offended. Have you got enough for it yet though?

SMITH: Getting there. Not all the way. But for the project sequence, our MPO, SANDAG, has done a tremendous job getting that moving.

TOMER: I'm thinking about the corollaries where they might have had to go, but to create, right, where, yeah, we've gotten some, but it sounds like you're not there yet, though, right? I mean, this is –

and this is, right – with freight, it's really easy. Frankly, it is economic competitiveness. It's interstate commerce. I mean this is easy arguments in Washington. This is not yet – they have not delivered enough yet. This is important to say. You all are clearly trying. I think we're just trying to. Really elevate what the actual challenges are on the ground, right, when it's not just about self-congratulatory, as they should, right of passing bills, but what does that mean like on the grounds? Same question here, right? What's the federal experience been like both on building consensus right in the region? That's a great legacy. I think Justin spoke to this really well too, right. But then what's been the desserts of that, right?

STUART: So, we've been really successful as an MPO. We've been super successful as the region. We're doing very well at bringing in the discretionary grants. I want to hit on public private partnership because of something that I think most people don't realize that we're doing that because we're not calling it that we have two railroad tracks. Same situation runs straight through the, you know, the region, all three counties through connects all three ports. Very important that regional and for freight infrastructure. Was put in and we were able to work with a private investor, it's Grupo Mexicana which is Florida East Coast Railway, and they were willing to double track their facilities to put in a private passenger rail system that goes all the way up to Orlando. At the same time, they were doing that, we partnered with them to put in quiet zones and necessary safety equipment and then we got another grant from FRA through USDOT to actually put additional railing in and additional safeguards to make sure that that quarter can stay the way it's supposed to operate.

So that's one private partnership. We have a second private partnership which was 595, a major corridor that was built 25 years earlier because we brought in a Spanish conglomerate called Draegos and they were actually willing to take the toll lane revenues and some of my federal dollars and actually build the facility and we need to go, right? No, just stay here. Okay. And so, the most important thing to take from that is we have a lot of opportunities to leverage private funds. You know, I was planning on doing that with the EV grants. I don't know if that's ever going to come back. We got our approval, didn't get the money yet. But that said, it's how can we partner with federal dollars to bring in the private sector? And I think that's the also important part. Not just our cities, not just our surtax. It takes. Everything to get things done.

It's a variety. It is everything under the sun, and that's one of our tourist taglines, because you get to see that in reality. And so, our rail lines both have passenger rail. One is public, one is private. We are putting a second public rail line on this private sector's property to actually operate another passenger rail line right now as we speak. And then I have a city, and this is fun. They want build a tunnel under this thing that's the size of a canal. But they call it the New River. And we, yeah. Anyway, so basically to do a tunnel there, it's a billion and a half to \$2 billion for one little spot on the space. And so, we're kind of like, well, where are you going to get the money? How is this going to work?

The provider the service provider which is a county in this point for them passenger rail is like we can't afford that we can afford a four hundred million so they went to the city and said yeah I know you want a tunnel go figure out how to bring in private sector money because we're not going to do that and so we're out there together trying to figure this out it can't be from federal investment and that's a lot of money to ask for sure you know there's a little bit of places in Florida deserve that and one last thing So before the Trump administration, before the Biden administration, before that Trump administration we had another administration, the Bush, that actually put in money through the federal grants uh... Through the federal process transportation bill for freight uh... All of the freight money went to Tallahassee one of the things my board directed me to do because I'm a total geek when it comes to freight uh... They said hey go work with the other MPOs around the state and Tallahassee is the FDOT. To ensure that we have coordinated investments in our state.

So, we actually got all of the MPOs together and said, what are the most important freight projects in your metropolitan area? And then let's rank them together. And so, we did. And then every year we would submit that to the state of Florida. And you know what worked? The second year the state got that list and they funded the projects on that list. So, I may not be benefiting from, I will be in the next year, but projects that were listed in there, Jacksonville got it, Tampa got it. But as a government and as things work in economics, that actually was beneficial to the overall state. So, we amped up our little tiny MPO and said how can we get that coordination happening statewide? And that's actually one of those things that I'd like to, that's a little feather in the hat, but it's working and we're delivering projects and that's how you get around Sacramento.

TOMER: Yeah, there you go. That's a great place to stop. Join me in thanking Caroline and Greg. And congressman, please.

* * * * *

TOMER: This is your introduction right now. You're going to be right there. Congressman Larsen, thank you for joining us. It's a really important set of days in Washington, so before you got here, it was not lost on any of us on how busy the time is, so thanks for making it. Representative Rick Larsen from Washington's 2nd District – thank you – is a 13-term congressman, right, and I think most important for this conversation today is the ranking member on the House Transportation Infrastructure Committee, which for those of outside Washington means he is the top Democrat on the committee.

Where I want to start the conversation today is we have passed a set of landmark bills, right? You all have been part of it. The IIJA is showing its amazing ability to deliver projects across the country. And oftentimes the conversation in Washington is around how we're sending money out. But as a champion for localities for so long, what I'm interested in is sharing your thoughts to start with as a representative of multiple metropolitan areas, if my map is right. How you hear about what needs you have in your communities. How are folks coming to you? How do they come to represent his offices? And how do you all translate that to what you wanna deliver here in Washington?

LARSEN: Well, first off, I deliver a lot in Washington, Washington state. And so, I'm always going to be clear. There's my Washington and there's this place I have to go to work. So, and, and I don't rely on people coming to my office to tell me what they need. I'm out in my district asking what they need. So, we put together the 2021 bill, the BIL IIJA bill. Spent a lot of time in the district. I represent all our parts of five counties. Spent a lot of time going around the district asking people what they needed and put out a report on this and use that as a model for other members to use to better structure what they need in their districts so they could have a structured ask of the committee. And in my district, I have a North Puget Sound. So, I have smaller ports. I have four transit agencies that get money directly. I've one rural transit agency. I got a BNSF line and Amtrak running north-south of Interstate 5 running north south. I'm got counties that are urban and suburban and rural.

So, I got of cats and dogs in my district. And so. The goal here is to develop something that, for me, was representative of the things I needed to ask for as part of the IIJA and be project-specific. So then, when we did pass it, we could follow up with those communities and say, all right, now we've done this and here's where you go for that dollar and here is where you go for the dollar and there is where we go for that dollar, and we've refreshed the report and are refreshing that report right now for the next go-around. I think in a nutshell, what I tell members is like, go out into your districts. You don't wanna have meetings in your office anyway. I never do, I hardly ever have a meeting. I don't know why I have office space. I'm never there, but I have staff who are there, that's why I office space, but go out in your districts, you'll better understand what you need and why you need it, as opposed to just waiting for folks to come into your office.

TOMER: I really like that. I think it's important for folks to remember how the ideas come up. Let's get to the heart of the matter for what folks probably want to hear. And not necessarily reauthorization, but I actually want to start with what's really important for our folks to remember and to hear your thoughts on this, which is frankly, bipartisanship. You know, we frankly, we probably acronym that bill so much that, well, BIL, that now we forgot what the B is for. And, of course, you can feel free to riff on if the House got enough of a voice in that bill the last time. But at the very least on the Senate side, and then I think in the House going forward, the reputation is for the current leadership, is that they've been up front a huge cut to Infrastructure Week, who we're here for. We heard from Senator Capito yesterday saying, you know, she really wants to work across the aisle with Senator Whitehouse. We've heard the same from Chairman Graves, too, right? So, kind of a question almost like in two parts. First one is, you know, just speak to us in an ideally candid way, right, about you know, what is bipartisanship like? And again, a lot of people here read news, you're not hearing a lot about bipartisanship in the news this week, but talk about how in infrastructure we do have bipartisanship. And then from that, what are your personal expectations or maybe goals for this next go around on authorization?

LARSEN: Yeah, don't read the news. I'm finishing up 11th season of X-Files in my spare time. I watch Masterpiece, Mystery on my PBS app. I am pro-Elmo. And I need to do that because there's a lot of

crap going down around here, and you need to take a break from it. But focus on what you need, and be sure you ask for it, whatever it is. And she's great. Shelly's a former House member, so she knows kind of the House culture, if you will. Secretary Duffy is a former House member, so understands it a little bit. I've talked to Sean more as secretary than I ever talked to him as a House member, when he was in the House.

So, you know, there's conversations going on, but on the committee especially, it's important. On the Committee on Transportation Infrastructure, we are, I like to say, an island of partnership in a sea of partisanship. There may be other examples of partnership in other committees. If there are, let me know. It would be interesting to find out. But on ours, it's definitely the case. And Sam, you know, preaches it, practices it. I preach it, I practice it. We tell members that if you want to be on TV in the District of Columbia, there are committees for that. If you want to be on TV in your district, we're the committee for that. We're going to accomplish things you can go home and talk about and brag about and not have to defend or be embarrassed by or shout and yell and scream about what you did to the president. There are committees for and I do that too, but not when it comes to transportation, except when it comes to, you know, when they're changing grant conditions that are totally unrelated to, to get a transportation grant, like most recently the sanctuary city language and things like that. I've been really clear about what I think about that. In fact, my state and my local county is one of the counties in the lawsuit on that particular one, challenging that. And I think that they'll probably win on that. But the point I want to make is that Secretary Duffy knows my views on that because I've told him my views on that. I didn't send a press release. I did send a, I actually did send press release, but I told him --

TOMER: You have to have the press release.

LARSEN: But I told him I was gonna send a press release, I told him I was not gonna not like these things ahead of time. Because we need to have a conversation because the end goal is to get a bipartisan bill that actually meets our needs on safety, on accessibility to the transportation system, on continuing the funding. So, the dollar. The dollar number is going to be an important part of this debate, and on the right programs to keep things moving. And we want to keep it going. We want to

the work going, keep women and men in construction continuing to build the next generation infrastructure, as well as build the next generation workforce to build that infrastructure. And we can't do that if we're not passing a bill and then not funding that bill.

TOMER: That's great. You said a really key word here for us in our long-term research at Brookings, which is accessibility. And I'm gonna read into that, that that means by all modes of transportation. We are personally passionate about that. Most folks, I think actually, and especially in the quiet quarters are as well. They understand the differences in every region and I loved your point about transit agencies in your district, right? It runs the gamut. So, I wanna ask you a question about kind of modes, if you will, right, on the surface bill. What's the tenor of the conversation that you're feeling? And frankly, what are your ambitions? And just so folks know what I'm talking about, I think everyone does, maybe those folks streaming. So, we're talking about beyond just driving, and of course, freight trucks, but also of course freight rail is there, but really especially public transportation, bicycle, and pedestrians.

LARSEN: Well, I think, first off, is to think about how we talk about these things. I think it's important that we not get bogged down in what we think the language is, as opposed to... I tell my staff all the time, like, don't tell me the name of the program, tell me what it does. And an example I give is my dad spent 35 years as a lineman and a foreman for the Snohomish County Public Utility District. Putting large, long wooden poles in the ground, climbing them and then putting wires on them so homes can get power. He never once called it electrification. And yet it happened. And yet, it happened. Don't get bogged down in the language about what you think you wanna call it. What are we trying to do?

Okay, so when it comes to roadway safety, as an example, a lot of Safe Streets for All, Safe Streets and Roads for All, I mean, I don't even, it's been named 19 times in my 26 years, 25 years in Congress, I dunno what it's called now. But the point is, it doesn't matter what it is called. The point is you have 40,000 roadway deaths a year. And if an investment in a bike lane and a sidewalk separates a person and a biker from a car and a car, think about the drivers too, a car from that biker and a walker, then you may be on the road to cutting 20% of that 40,000 number. Also think about

that the highest rate is on travel reservations. Highest rate of roadway deaths. It's not in Broward, it's not never Washington, it's on travel reservation. Second highest rate, it's in rural areas, then suburban, then urban. So, we can talk about equity in terms of saving lives, and then we don't have to get bogged down on whether a sidewalk makes a community healthier and greener, or riding a bike makes things healthier and greener, but it sure as hell will make things safer. So, think about the language we all use, because the end result is the thing, not what you think about it, the end result is the thing.

And then I think same on transit. I've got rural transit. There're rural transit agencies all over the country who are going to be as challenged getting dollars because this is, frankly, it's not an administration and it's a majority that particularly wants to fund transit as we have funded it in the past. And so, we're gonna have to fight for those dollars for transit. But transit does help move people to and from work, to and from school. It does help reduce congestion. It does benefit drivers, and it benefits the transit riders. And we need to talk about it in terms of those benefits. Again, transit not for its own sake, but in terms the context of how do you move people and goods in a 21st century economy. So, we need be thinking about these things and the shorthand is, like, remember how we talked about this stuff in 2015, all the way back then? Yeah. Talk like that.

TOMER: I like that element of speaking to folks on an earlier question we were talking about. Really, what are the outcomes that animate why we make these investments? It always feels to me -- I'm not an elected official in the political side, but it always strikes me as that resonates most when you just talk to everyday folks, when you talk to your family. That's what they get where we're doing this. I think we have time for one more question, and I know it's something you're passionate about. Frankly, it's one we're passionate about too, which is how do we make sure dollars are getting to localities. You know, the IIJA deserves a lot of credit, the bill authors, for trying something. If I can put a plug in for one thing, a lot folks in this town talk about innovation and say they don't do failure, which is a sentence that doesn't make sense. So, you got to try new things. But as we're getting ready for a new bill, what I want to be really clear about is that, in this question is, how do we make sure we still deliver as much money to localities as possible? Because that key theme seems to matter.

LARSEN: So first off, on the innovation point, I made this point to a couple people in the administrations. The only innovation, the only really big innovation we did that had to do with technology innovation in the IIJA, was in fact electric vehicle charging. And so, don't talk about innovation if you're not going to be doing that unless you've got some other grand idea about innovation. So, what the administration is talking about is they call it core infrastructure. Again, I have no idea what that means either. I think they mean roads, bridges, and highways, and they don't mean transit or rail. I think that's what it means, but we have member day-to-day testifying, so I'm making a note of all—I'm a Democrat, I've got Republican colleagues—making a note of what everyone is saying, including the Republicans coming in saying, we love Amtrak, we need more Amtraks service. So, like, you're gonna get a call from me.

But the other thing is making sure that, you know, we funded a lot of these Safe Street for All grants, planning grants all over the country, importantly, most importantly, in my district. And then, but now those plans are getting done and we need to fund getting those plans implemented. And I think we need be pushing on that point as well as we move forward on that. I think so that's going to go to MPOs or TPOs and so on and local folks. But one thing that we did in the IIJA, it was this, uh, a lot of, you know, more, more competitive discretionary grants than in the past. Well, you, know, the states, and I love my state of Washington, Democratic state, and they had the same views as Oklahoma did on this one, and, and Florida and other states is like, well, it had all that, all that money, it should have gone to the states. So, well it's not, you got plenty, you've got more money than you did before, you just didn't get all the money that you wanted, welcome to Congress.

And so, what I've been pushing is to get the cities. NLC, for instance, and NACO in the counties to really up their game amp up their game when it comes to talking about getting these dollars directly, not on everything, but certainly getting dollars directly because, sadly, there are some states that take all the money, and then they, um, then they ignore some of the cities and counties that don't like, that's internal state politics. Not my personal problem in our state, we've got a system for that between the legislature and the cities and counties to sort a lot out. Other states don't. But in fact, counties and cities with capacity to take these, to utilize these grants and do projects is important. We also have smaller, very much smaller towns like Linden, Washington, and my district that decided to take a leap,

figure out how to apply directly and then implement federal money directly for projects, and they've been fairly successful at it. Getting technical assistance to support their efforts in doing that. Not everyone is going to do that, not everyone wants to do it, I get it. But it is, it can be a system that works. And so, the point is, there's going to be this how much to the state formula program versus how much in competitive. And, you know, the truth of it is members of Congress who are arguing that states should, we should really emphasize the states, are going to hear from local folks about the problems, and we're going to need to do some discretionary. It's politics, it's the truth of it, as local gets when it comes to these things. But we do need to continue to make the case that there is a room for counties, for cities, for the MPO, the program or TPO program to be able to have some projects that are decided on locally to get funding and so they can get implemented.

TOMER: We really appreciate it. And most importantly, we appreciate you making time to come down here today to share your candid thoughts with us. We're gonna break right here. So, I'm just gonna thank everyone for both showing up, for the panelists, including two folks from San Diego who flew across country for it, and everyone for tuning in online. Thank you for your time. Enjoy the rest of Infrastructure Week.