

Local gov. leaders: New transportation grant program's popularity points to significant unmet infrastructure needs in Wisconsin

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[MADISON...] Local government leaders today said the overwhelming popularity of a new Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) grant program points to a continued need to invest in Wisconsin infrastructure.

“The new MLS grant program not only will help communities with projects all across the state, but it has also provided state officials with a clear, undeniable record of the unmet needs,” said Mike Koles, executive director of the Wisconsin Towns Association. “We applaud the Wisconsin Department of Transportation’s streamlined application process. The process ensures that whatever needs can be met with these funds will happen sooner rather than later, which saves taxpayers money by avoiding the inflationary costs that manifest themselves when projects are pushed further into the future.”

The bi-partisan Wisconsin 2019-21 biennial budget provided \$75 million to local and tribal governments in one-time funding through the Multimodal Local Supplement (MLS) program. The grants pay up to 90% of total eligible costs with local governments providing a minimum of 10% cost share.

According to WisDOT, 1,596 eligible grant applications were submitted by cities, villages, towns, counties, and tribal governments. The needs detailed in the applications total \$1.47 billion.

“The needs are unquestionable, and while we realize this one-time grant program is not a long-term answer to more than a billion dollars of reported local community needs, it is a significant step in the right direction,” added League of Wisconsin Municipalities Executive Director Jerry Deschane. “We have to start chipping away at these lists of projects.”

“This grant program will allow counties to continue to invest in much needed transportation projects in their communities,” said Wisconsin Counties Association Executive Director Mark D. O’Connell. “We commend the Wisconsin Department of Transportation for their leadership in creating a program that empowers our county highway departments to apply and receive these funds expeditiously, allowing them time to make the biggest impact.”

MLS funding is available for new projects statewide related to:

- Roads
- Bridges
- Railroads
- Transit capital and facility projects
- Bicycle and pedestrian accommodations
- Harbors

“Our members were able to document their needs, and as you can see, those needs are real, and they are significant,” said Dan Fedderly, executive director of the Wisconsin County Highway Association. “While we know this isn’t the comprehensive funding solution Wisconsin desperately needs, we are appreciative that the Legislature and Governor agreed to create the program. Every little bit helps.”

To be eligible, projects required a six-year completion timeframe. Design-only projects, planning studies, and maintenance activities are ineligible for the grants, which will be capped at \$3.5 million per project.

The project selection process will be competitive, with a focus on measurable economic benefits. Stakeholders will provide input through local government committees, which will meet in the coming weeks to score project applications. MLS project awards will be announced by WisDOT in February.

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