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**Is Columbus the Future of Urban Transportation?**

It's likely that other cities will gain a lot from the experiences of the winner of the Smart City Challenge.

BY [CHARLES CHIEPPO](http://www.governing.com/authors/Charles-Chieppo.html) | JULY 5, 2016

In a sense, Columbus wasn't really the only winner of the U.S. Department of Transportation's [Smart City Challenge](http://www.governing.com/topics/transportation-infrastructure/gov-columbus-ohio-smart-city-winner.html), although Ohio's capital did beat out 77 other cities last month to take the $40 million prize. Municipal officials across the country are likely to have a lot to learn from what happens in Columbus going forward, and it's very possible that the lessons won't just be about transportation. They might also be learning about how to eliminate barriers to economic growth and leverage local assets.

The Smart City Challenge is a grant competition designed to help the winner become the first city to fully integrate new technologies -- everything from [bridge sensors](http://www.governing.com/blogs/bfc/col-infrastructure-maintenance-cost-south-carolina-bridge-monitoring.html) to self-driving cars -- and become a model for other municipalities.

Columbus' plans include connecting underserved populations to opportunity by solving public transportation's "first and last mile gap." Among other things, the city is looking at using electric self-driving vehicles to get people to transit stations and from the stations to their final destinations.

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The city's application also included a proposed "smart corridor" where vehicles can connect with infrastructure and other vehicles. This will facilitate better data collection and real-time coordination of bus rapid transit and signal prioritization to speed transit trips. Columbus is wise to focus on BRT, which is far more cost-effective than rail in all but the densest urban settings.

That's not all. The plan also includes development of apps to efficiently route trucks and other logistics vehicles to avoid traffic, as well as smartphone apps to provide information about transit options for visitors and parking availability.

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One reason Columbus won out over the other finalists -- Austin, Texas; Denver; Kansas City, Mo.; Pittsburgh; Portland, Ore.; and San Francisco -- was the way it worked with local stakeholders to leverage the impact of the $40 million federal grant. A group of local businesses called the Columbus Partnership agreed [to kick in an additional $90 million](http://www.govtech.com/fs/Columbus-Ohio-Ups-the-Stakes-with-90-Million-Addition-to-Smart-City-Challenge.html) if the city was selected. And thanks to another $10 million pledge by the investment firm Vulcan Inc. to be used for electric-vehicle programs, all told Columbus will have $140 million to work with.

The money doesn't tell the whole story. Several companies also have offered to donate their technologies. Sidewalk Labs, a division of Alphabet, has offered data-gathering kiosks and access to its new transportation analytics platform Amazon is offering cloud services, Mobileye has volunteered to equip buses with pedestrian and cyclist detection and avoidance systems, and Local Motors says it's prepared to deploy talking, self-driving electric shuttles.

While some new roads and transit lines will be built, there's a growing recognition that in the 21st century technology is usually the most efficient way to maximize transportation assets. By making better use of existing infrastructure, it can often offer a far greater return on public investment.

And additional capacity is sorely needed. The fact that those Columbus businesses decided to kick in $90 million speaks volumes about the degree to which they recognize that congestion and inadequate transportation infrastructure are choking off economic growth.

Winning a grant is just the start; Columbus must of course be skillful in the deployment of its new resources. But if done right, the city could become a model for how smart investments in transportation technology can unleash economic growth.

Charlie\_Chieppo@hks.harvard.edu


#### [Charles Chieppo](http://www.governing.com/authors/Charles-Chieppo.html)

*Charles Chieppo is a research fellow at the Ash Center of the Harvard Kennedy School.*

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