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State Transportation Funding in California: Improving Program Evaluation for Climate Justice



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Issue

Since passing California's Road Repair and Accountability Act of 2017, also known as Senate Bill 1 (SB1), Caltrans and the California State Transportation Agency (CalSTA) have launched thousands of infrastructure projects across the state. Over the next decade, the state will invest \$54 billion to achieve safety improvements, reduce traffic delays, improve goods movement, and increase options for transit. These projects are a welcome improvement to California's infrastructure, and critical to maintaining mobility across the state. As California spends the most money in its history to improve transportation infrastructure, these expenditures must align with statewide goals and targets, especially in support of the state's efforts to advance social equity and mitigate the effects of climate change.

This brief takes a critical look at how SB1 projects may impact social equity and climate change. There is an overwhelming absence of evaluation criteria (including goals, objectives, targets, etc.) that are necessary to conduct project evaluation that must be corrected to ensure that funding will successfully further the state's goals.

Study Approach

For this project, the researcher reviewed existing program evaluation methodologies at the national, state, regional, and local levels to determine best practices for evaluating transportation projects. This was followed by an analysis of SB1's current project portfolio and available data to

identify successes and opportunities for improved project evaluation, and alignment towards social equity and climate goals.

Research Findings

- A small number of projects receive a disproportionate amount of funding. Nearly 50% of all SB1 funds pay for projects in the State Highway Operations and Trade Corridor Improvement programs, amounting to only 874 projects, or just 15% of all SB1 projects. The Local Streets and Roads (LSR) program stands out for the opposite reason. This program accounts for 56% of all SB1 projects but comprises only 10% of its funding, as shown in Figure 1.
- All SB1 funds have been programmed for the bill's life-cycle, but there is no data on how these programmed funds will be expended over time. This complicates the possibilities for program evaluation.
- SB1 lacks consistent evaluation criteria across its programs. The goals that exist are not connected to measurable criteria that would allow Caltrans to determine if funds are being spent efficiently and effectively. These goals are also not directly related to social equity or climate change. While there may be indirect connections, the clear focus on roadway projects likely negates any potential improvements that could be made over time.

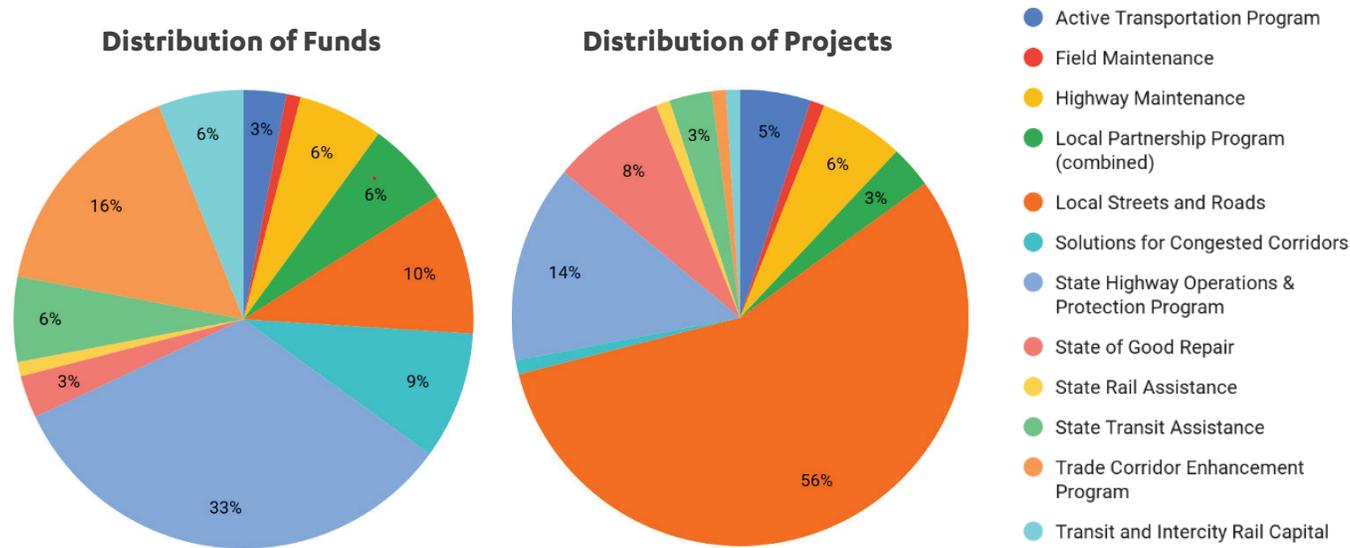


Figure 1. Distribution of SB1 Funds and Projects by Program Area

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this analysis, the following recommendations will allow Caltrans to align projects with equity and climate goals and improve project evaluation.

Align SB1 and its programs with Caltrans’ strategic plan. Caltrans should explicitly identify how SB1 and its programs support the core values, strategic imperatives, and goals identified in the 2020-2024 Strategic Plan.

Establish evaluation criteria across SB1. The establishment of aspirational, achievable, and measurable goals and performance indicators for all of SB1’s programs will increase the rigor of project selection and allow Caltrans to better align program goals with their strategic vision.

Establish social equity and climate change goals for the Local Streets and Roads program. Specific criteria for local municipalities and jurisdictions to meet will advance social equity and climate action goals, while clearly defining the purpose and outcomes of the LSR program.

Improve data quality throughout the SB1 program. Establish more robust, publicly available datasets with strong data standards to improve both internal and external program evaluation. This should also include geographic data.



Bressette, B. (2022). State Transportation Funding in California: Progressive Targets or Prehistoric Thinking? (Master’s capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0qn4n2sd>.