

Trump administration takes aim at bike lanes, other Washington projects



The 1,000-foot-long Wilburton Trestle in Bellevue will be a part of Eastrail, a 42-mile trail on the Eastside. A U.S. Department of Transportation order may imperil completion of Eastrail and other transportation projects in the state. (Karen Ducey / The Seattle Times, 2024)

By Nicholas Deshais Seattle Times staff reporter

The U.S. Department of Transportation has ordered state officials to scrutinize all projects that received federal grant spending over the past four years on bike lanes, electric vehicle charging stations and other “green infrastructure,” with an eye toward potentially canceling any project that doesn’t align with the Trump administration’s goals.

The order, which came in a memo to state transportation agencies this week, is the latest in a series of actions by the Trump administration to revoke Biden-era spending and policies on climate-related projects.

“The focus of this review is to identify project scope and activities that are allocating funding to advance climate, equity and other priorities counter to the Administration’s Executive Orders,” reads the memo, which was first shared by Yonah Freemark, a researcher with the Urban Institute.

The memo, which seeks to review projects funded beginning in fiscal year 2022, further defines activities considered contrary to President Donald Trump’s executive orders that could lead to projects being “canceled entirely.” They include bikeways such as recreational trails and shared-use paths, electric vehicles and charging networks, and climate change, environmental

justice, equity and gender-specific activities.

Earlier this week, Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy rescinded Biden-era memos that he said compelled state agencies to figure a “social justice and environmental agenda” into infrastructure project decisions, which he said was “an attempt to push a radical social and environmental agenda on the American people.” Local officials weren’t sure what to make of the memo, or if it was even legal.

U.S. Rep. Rick Larsen, D-Everett, is the ranking Democrat on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. He said he understands that new administrations get to spend federal dollars in a way that aligns with their policies and priorities. What he doesn’t understand is how Duffy — whom he knows from their shared time in Congress, and has talked to extensively in recent weeks about what they jointly call “the green stuff” — expects to claw back “dollars that (are) already obligated and being spent.”

“New administrations get to do things. I get that. For the dollars that aren’t obligated, and haven’t been spent, I fully expected the Department of Transportation to change conditions of new projects,” Larsen said, noting that Duffy instructed his department to give preference in awarding grants to communities with marriage and birthrates higher than the national average. “But to focus on bike and pedestrian infrastructure as some sort of dog whistle for fighting climate change (policies) is totally off the mark.”

Larsen said he’s sent Duffy’s memo to the Congressional Research Service “to get some eyes on it from an objective legal analysis perspective, to see if it’s legal” to rescind federal funding that’s “signed, sealed, delivered.”

Regardless, Larsen said the action to revoke years of grant spending could accelerate the trend of increasing deaths and serious injuries on the nation’s roadways, which he called a “national epidemic.”

Statewide, 810 people were killed in crashes involving a motor vehicle in 2023, a 33-year high, and 40,990 people died on U.S. roads.

“There’s a strict federal interest in preventing these deaths,” Larsen said. “Investing in sidewalks and bike infrastructure ... is about saving lives and is about safety.”

Larsen couldn’t estimate how many projects in the state could be affected but said the imperiled dollars are “definitely in the double-digit millions.”

Beyond that, he said Duffy and Trump’s attempt to punish Democratic-leaning states would hit Republican ones as well.

“There are projects in red states that include bike and pedestrian aspects. Multimillion-dollar projects,” he said. “You will be hitting red states and blue states, red districts and blue districts, Trump districts and (Kamala) Harris districts.”

Stefanie Randolph, a Washington State Department of Transportation spokesperson, wouldn’t say if a review of federal grants has begun and had no estimate on how much funding, or what projects, could be at risk.

“We continue to seek clarification with (the Federal Highway Administration) and other partners about the implications and next steps related to federal funding actions,” said Randolph in an email.

It’s unclear if Duffy’s order could affect the state’s plan to electrify the ferry fleet, but the \$1.7 billion dedicated so far toward the electrification program has come from state sources: the Move Ahead Washington transportation spending package and money generated by the state’s carbon market under the Climate Commitment Act.

King County Metro relies on federal grants for both maintenance and capital investments. Since Trump took office, the agency has been reviewing the financial and legal impacts from any change in federal assistance, according to Al Sanders, a Metro spokesperson.

Like Larsen, Vicky Clarke, deputy director of Cascade Bicycle Club, said it was impossible to estimate the scope of threatened projects but that the impact would be statewide and lead to more death and injury.

“There are projects in Spokane and in Yakima and of course in the Puget Sound region. It’s all across the state,” Clarke said. “The best case scenario is delay. Delaying these projects, which at their heart is safety, means you’re perpetuating the unsafe transportation system we have.”

Clarke was reviewing the last few years of grants but said the “top of mind” projects in jeopardy deal with Eastrail and the Puget Sound to Pacific Trail, both of which won federal grant funding in recent years.

The project to bridge Eastrail — a 42-mile trail that eventually will connect Renton to Redmond and Snohomish County, largely on a former BNSF rail line — over Interstate 90 was awarded \$25 million in federal funding last summer. An additional \$5 million went to Eastrail planning in Woodinville.

In 2023, the Puget Sound to Pacific Trail won a \$16 million grant to finish the 200-mile trail spanning the Olympic Peninsula, connecting Washington State Ferries terminals in Kingston, Port Townsend and Bainbridge Island to La Push on the coast.

Beyond those marquee projects, dozens of others aim to separate pedestrians and cyclists from vehicles. These Safe Streets and Roads for All grants went to places like Mill Creek, the Cowlitz-Wahkiakum Council of Governments in Kelso, Sedro-Wooley, East Wenatchee, Pasco, Prosser, Electric City and the Yakama Nation, among others.

“It’s a lot of upgrades to an old and outdated transportation system that we desperately, desperately need,” Clarke said.

In the end, if Duffy’s memo withstands legal and political scrutiny, Larsen questioned the sheer logistics of the order.

“I don’t know who is sitting at the Department of Transportation ready to review thousands and thousands of projects every day,” he said. “It’s just not possible.”