

HOW FEDERAL TRANSPORTATION DOLLARS ARE SPENT IN TOMPKINS COUNTY ANNUAL LISTING OF PROJECT OBLIGATIONS

The Ithaca-Tompkins County Transportation Council's *Transportation Improvement Program* (TIP) is a five-year listing of transportation projects that will be paid for in part with money from the Federal Highway Administration or Federal Transit Administration. For each project, the TIP lists the intended project schedule and the estimated cost. Project schedules often change as a result of unexpected design challenges, personnel, contractor or consultant availability, or due to changes in budget resource availability. Thus, the TIP does not yield an exact picture of actual project expenditures.

(Note: the latest TIP covers the years 2020-2024. The document is available in at: <http://tompkinscountyny.gov/itctc>)

To ensure that the public has a more accurate understanding of how federal funds are actually being spent on transportation projects, federal regulations include a requirement that the organizations responsible for approving the Transportation Improvement Program publish an annual listing of project **obligations**.

What are "project obligations"?

You might think of this as setting up a checking account for a specific purpose (programming a project in the TIP) and then making payments (funding obligations). In order to begin work on any phase of a transportation project, federal funds must be obligated. This means that the money is set aside for that particular phase of work, which can then be used to pay bills. The project expenses may be for instance, bills from a design consultant, a construction contractor, or payroll costs for New York State DOT employees working on the project.

Do project obligations mean the work is underway?

Not in all cases; project accounts are set up particularly for the initial phases of a project to enable the work to start. It may take a while, for example to select and hire a design consultant and have them actually begin work.

FHWA vs. FTA - TIP projects are separated into highway and transit projects. Highway projects are funded through the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and transit projects by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). The rules for the distribution and expenditure of the two fund types vary significantly. Therefore, they remain mostly apart during the planning process and thus in their presentation in the obligations tables.

What are funding categories?

Federal funding sources are restricted for use for certain eligible purposes. Transportation projects may contain several components that are related to the primary task; the work, for instance, may include safety related components as well as bicycle and pedestrian improvements. The funding for these project components may originate from different sources (categories) but are incorporated into the overall scope of work. Although most projects are funded from a single fund category, funding may be drawn from several Federal fund categories and be used for the various components of each project. FHWA fund categories in the obligations list may include:

STBG = Surface Transportation Block Grant Program

STPBG-FLEX = Flexible Funds – may be used in a variety of project types

NHPP = National Highway Performance Program Funds – for National Highway System roadways and select bridges

STPBG-OSB = Off-System Bridge Funds – for bridges off the federal aid system of roadways

HSIP = Highway Safety Improvement Program Funds – targeted for safety projects

TAP = Transportation Alternatives Program Funds

SRTS = Safe Routes To School

RTP - Recreational Trail Program Funds

HPP – High Priority Projects – congressional set-asides for specific projects

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