DoT Announces “Smart City” Challenge to Increase Infrastructure Efficiency in Urban Areas

December 13, 2015

On December 7, 2015, the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) issued a Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) for “Beyond Traffic: The Smart City Challenge,” the first in a two-part solicitation for a federally funded program aimed at developing “a holistic, integrated approach to improving surface transportation performance within a city and integrating this approach to improving smart city domains such as public safety, public services, and energy.” DOT will award $40 million to one mid-sized city that demonstrates how it will use the funds to address challenges such as congestion, safety, climate change, and improving connections with underserved communities. Broadband providers that are considering deploying or expanding their networks in mid-sized cities may want to consider partnering with an eligible applicant to use some of the funds to either deploy new broadband infrastructure or add increased capacity to the existing network to accommodate new technology such as connected cars. Initial applications for this grant opportunity are due on February 4, 2016. DOT will then narrow the field to five finalists, and make a selection in June 2016.

The Smart City Challenge began in response to a prediction that the U.S. population will increase by over 70 million people in the next 30 years, with growth occurring most rapidly in metropolitan areas or cities. This means that cities will need to find ways to alleviate pressure on their already strained infrastructure systems, including transportation channels. The Smart City Challenge aims to act as a catalyst to this process. It focuses on emerging technologies such as Intelligent Transportation Systems, connected vehicle technologies, and automated vehicles as a way to “make moving people and goods safer, more efficient, and more secure.” For instance, the NOFO suggests that by deploying connected vehicle technology, providing real-time traveler information, and implementing advanced technology and policies to promote sustainability, a Smart City could improve transportation safety, enhance mobility throughout a metropolitan area, and tackle climate change issues. DOT hopes that cities can leverage a more efficient transportation system to improve “mobility, sustainability, and livability for citizens and businesses, and greatly increase the attractiveness and competitiveness of cities and regions.”

The Smart City Challenge is open to State and local governments, tribal governments, transit agencies and authorities, public toll authorities, metropolitan planning organizations, other subdivisions of a State or local government, or a combination of any of the above. While private companies are not eligible to apply directly, we encourage you to partner with one or more eligible entities to develop and deploy some of the advanced technologies envisioned in the NOFO.

Although not expressly required, the NOFO indicates that the ideal Smart City would have certain attributes, including the following: a population between 250,000 and 800,000 people, a dense urban population, and an existing public transportation system.

The award decisions for the challenge will occur in two stages. In the first stage, DOT will review all applications and select five finalists, each of which will receive a $100,000 Concept Development award to allow them to further develop their Smart City proposals. DOT will then select one winner to receive a $40 million award to implement its plan.

If you are interested in learning more about the Smart City Challenge, forming a partnership, or exploring other federal funding opportunities for broadband, please contact Jennifer Holtz at jholtz@kelleydrye.com or any member of the Communications Practice Group.