

USDOT Holds Inaugural SMART Grantee Summit, Takes a Collaborative Approach to Grant Administration



All photos via USDOT

Summit Overview

On September 21st and 22nd, 2023, the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) held its inaugural SMART Grantee Summit for the [Strengthening Mobility and Revolutionizing Transportation \(SMART\) Grants program](#). The Summit was held at USDOT Headquarters in Washington, D.C. with **over 200 participants in attendance**, including USDOT leadership and SMART grant recipients from 33 states. To view the Summit agenda, visit the [SMART Summit 2023 webpage](#).

All grant recipients selected from the Fiscal Year 2022 Stage 1 Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) were invited to participate in the 2-day event. Attendees from **58 project teams representing more than \$90 million in grant awards** participated. Project teams included representatives from the lead applicants as well as their project partners.

The **SMART** Grants Program is a discretionary grant program established through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) to provide grants to eligible public sector agencies to conduct demonstration projects focused on advanced smart community technologies and systems in order to improve transportation efficiency and safety. Through BIL, the program is appropriated \$100 million annually for fiscal years 2022-2026.

To learn more about the Fiscal Year 2022 grant recipients, visit the [SMART Grants Program website](#).



Lynda Tran facilitates a discussion on innovation with USDOT leadership. (Left to right: Lynda Tran, Shailen Bhatt, Christopher Coes, Dr. Robert Hampshire, and Veronica Vanterpool)

Panel Sessions

The Summit began with opening remarks from Carlos Monje, Under Secretary of Transportation for Policy, and later featured three panels that covered the topics of innovative technology and disruption, data governance and partnerships, and inclusive innovation. Panelists highlighted the current moment of disruption that technology and funding opportunities have

created, reminding awardees that failure is often

a necessary part of this experimentation process. Many panelists also emphasized that successful technologies understand and meet the needs of end users; getting to that point requires intentional engagement with all members of the community.

"You are embarking on a journey to improve your transportation systems, but your work will have much broader impacts as we undertake large-scale transformative investments across our nation."

– Carlos Monje, Under Secretary of Transportation for Policy



Deputy Assistant Secretary Dr. Robert Hampshire (left) in conversation with author Jennifer Pahlka (right).

Attendees also participated in a special fireside chat with Dr. Robert Hampshire, USDOT Deputy Assistant Secretary for Research and Technology, and Jennifer Pahlka, former U.S. Deputy Chief Technology Officer and author of *Recoding America*. The discussion showcased examples of user-centric solutions to local problems while also identifying strategies that SMART project teams can use to successfully implement and scale their projects. Recordings of select panel sessions are available on the [SMART Summit 2023 webpage](#).

Breakout Sessions

During smaller breakout sessions, SMART grantees were grouped by their projects' respective [technology areas](#), learning from other project teams and their experiences around the country. For example, facilitators led the groups through visioning exercises where project teams looked ahead to how their projects could be scaled. Teams also discussed current challenges and opportunities in their Stage 1 projects, such as collaborating with community partners or setting quantitative milestones. Subject matter experts from across



Awardees participate in breakout room discussions.

USDOT Operating Administrations participated in these discussions, providing their own support and expertise.

In many of the breakout sessions, attendees indicated they would continue conversations after the Summit to keep learning from one another as the inaugural class of SMART grant recipients. Between sessions, awardees could attend grants management “office hours” to ask SMART grant managers and the program team questions specific to their projects.

Key Takeaways

Over the course of the Summit, several key takeaways emerged. Note that this list is not exhaustive:

- **Building local capacity** and a talent pipeline is essential to unlocking the benefits of SMART Grants technologies.
- It is imperative that project teams **center the user at every stage**. This includes involving people earlier on, working in quicker iterative cycles, and focusing on *product* management, not just *project* management.
- Many recipients discussed their intent to **involve stakeholders early**, use **inclusive processes and plain language RFPs**, and create **intentional partnerships**.
- **Long term project maintenance**, including securing funding and building technical capacity, is an area that local governments need support in.
- **Challenges to address in Stage 1** include: seasonal impacts on operations, stakeholder alignment, cybersecurity risks, integrating new technologies into existing procedures and standard operations, and navigating federal requirements including but not limited to procurement, BABA, and NEPA.
- Project teams requested **further guidance on reporting and procurement requirements**. Several teams also expressed **concerns about meeting period of performance requirements** given challenges such as procurement requirements, supply chain issues and contracting.
- In breakout sessions, project teams noted the importance of conducting meaningful community engagement at every part of the project process. Some groups expressed interest in receiving further guidance on **how to incorporate the Justice40 initiative** into their projects.
- Attendees **identified potential obstacles in Stage 2** such as procurement, long term financing, creating new interoperable data standards, and stakeholder management.

Outcomes and Next Steps

Following the Summit, U.S. DOT provided additional resources on reporting and procurement, including an informational webinar and guidance documents that can be found on the [SMART Grants Management webpage](#). U.S. DOT will continue to release updated guidance and host webinars as necessary.

Fiscal Year 2022 Stage 1 grantees will be the first group eligible to apply for a competitive Stage 2 grant, which is anticipated in 2024. Stage 2 of the program will provide funding for projects that are designed to result in a scaled-up demonstration of the Stage 1 concept.

U.S. DOT anticipates hosting an annual SMART Summit and will release 2024 Summit details in the coming months.

Gallery Photos *(via USDOT)*



