

Smart City Challenge: Pittsburgh makes 10-minute push for \$50 million

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Michael Henninger/Post-Gazette

Mayor Bill Peduto's job will be to convince officials that Pittsburgh not only has the best ideas but is best suited to share those ideas with other communities across the state and country.

By Ed Blazina / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Pittsburgh makes its final 10-minute pitch Thursday for a \$50 million federal prize.

The U.S. Department of Transportation has summoned Pittsburgh and the six other finalists in the Smart City Challenge to Washington, D.C., for one last attempt to convince federal officials they have the best proposal to revitalize transportation in their cities. The winner will be announced by the end of the month.

"We're doing something a little different here, a little exciting," said Jon Romano, spokesman for the

Department of Transportation. “We’re going to have everyone come in and make a pitch like an advertising campaign.”

Each city will present a 3-minute video and make a 7-minute oral presentation describing its proposal, some of which are 60 pages or more, Mr. Romano said. Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto will head a team of a half-dozen and make the oral presentation.

The presentations will be available online via a live video stream of the event. Each city also will make a technical presentation to department staffers before the formal presentation.

Alex Pazuchanics, the mayor’s policy coordinator who has been overseeing the effort, said Mr. Peduto’s job will be to convince officials that Pittsburgh not only has the best ideas but also is best-suited to share those ideas with other communities across the state and country.

The final presentation follows a process that has been far from the normal fill-in-the-blanks government application, Mr. Pazuchanics said. It will be the culmination of a whirlwind six months since federal officials announced the challenge program late last year.

“It’s been a very unconventional application process,” Mr. Pazuchanics said.

“It has opened up the imagination of the people involved.”

Pittsburgh spent 2½ months putting together its initial proposal, then waited while federal officials reviewed 78 applicants. From that group, seven were selected as finalists and given \$100,000 and two more months to refine their proposals: Pittsburgh; Austin, Texas; Columbus, Ohio; Denver; Kansas City, Mo.; Portland, Ore.; and San Francisco.

Last month, Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx visited each city for his own overview of the applications, which were filed May 24.

For competitive reasons, the city has been guarded about parts of its proposal, but a lot of it has brought together a bunch of separate ideas that already were in various stages.

On the transportation end, it includes ideas such as Bus Rapid Transit to link Downtown and Oakland via Uptown; perfecting the self-driving vehicle being developed at Carnegie Mellon University; using sensors already available on vehicles to control traffic lights; more bicycle lanes; better location coordination for Port Authority bus and T system stops; and a shared-space concept for vehicles and pedestrians in the lower Golden Triangle that would have no traffic signals.

But beyond that, Mr. Peduto envisions the transportation effort as a transformative economic driver for the region. In addition to the region becoming the manufacturing center for sensors, vehicle components and other technological improvements, the city’s proposal forecasts development of more efficient electric and natural gas vehicles that reduce pollution and production of new, self-sustaining energy systems to power

them and the region.

Mr. Romano said the challenge program generated the type of responses Mr. Foxx was looking for, proposing coordinated, long-term ideas for dealing with transportation issues as more people return to living in urban areas.

The department may use the same approach with other grants in the future, he said.

“We said, ‘We’re going to offer you [\$50 million] and you’re going to tell us the best ways you can use that,’” Mr. Romano said. “It’s really insane. It got people to look at the whole transportation system.

“We have 155 partners among the seven cities, which is great.”

Regardless of which city wins the challenge grant, Mr. Romano said, transportation officials already have begun reviewing possible sources of funding to help all 78 applicants move forward with good ideas.

“Obviously, there is one winner,” he said. “But we’re going to work hard with the other applicants through the summer to see if we can push these ideas ahead.”

The challenge grant includes \$40 million from the Department of Transportation; \$10 million from Paul G. Allen’s Vulcan Inc.; \$1 million in cloud service credits from Amazon Web Service; and additional funds from Mobileye, Autodesk and Alphabet’s Sidewalk Labs.

Mr. Peduto has said that if Pittsburgh wins, he hopes to double the grant by tapping local foundations, some of which already participated in the grant application.

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