

Senator pans federal contract for traffic information site

By Aliya Sternstein [National Journal's Technology Daily](#) July 23, 2007

Sen. Orrin Hatch has accused the Transportation Department of squelching competition for an open-bid contract to collect and post real-time data on traffic conditions.

Traffic.com has been under contract with the department since 1999 to deploy "intelligent transportation systems," or ITS, capable of measuring and managing the performance of the nation's highways. By installing digital roadside sensors, Traffic.com will be able to offer citizens free online access to basic traffic data and give agencies archived data in 26 metro areas, including Boston, Detroit, Los Angeles and Tampa, Fla.

The equipment tracks traffic volume, speed and, sometimes, vehicle classification.

Under the 1999 program, Traffic.com has sole discretion over funding for 10 years after each installation. Hatch, R-Utah, has said the contract gave Traffic.com a long-term monopoly on government data collection.

In 2005, he successfully pushed through legislation to level the playing field for small businesses outside the 26 areas covered by the government contract with Traffic.com. Under the new law, the follow-on contract, or program extension, allows for state agencies to access funding for ITS without using Traffic.com.

But Traffic.com still has the upper hand, Hatch said. In a May 10 letter to Transportation Secretary Mary Peters, he said "the overwhelming majority of the remaining funds available" for the program went to the initial city partnerships with Traffic.com. "By continuing its clear bias toward Traffic.com, I believe [Transportation] is stifling competition and ultimately harming consumers, businesses and taxpayers."

Bill Allison, a senior fellow with the Sunlight Foundation, an open-government group, noted in a post to his blog on July 9 that the department's pre-solicitation notice for the follow-on bids uses language that seems to discourage potential bidders from seeking more information on the contract.

For example, the document states: "Freedom of Information Act requests for copies of [Traffic.com's] contract document are unlikely to be fruitful for organizations wishing to compete for this follow-on project. ... Any attempt, by an offeror submitting a proposal for this follow-on project, to respond to

[Traffic.com's proposal] would almost certainly call into serious question the offeror's grasp of, and commitment to attaining, the technical objectives of this follow-on project."

Transportation Department spokesman Ian Grossman said on Friday that the intent of the language was to separate the follow-on program from the existing Traffic.com program. "We want to be clear [that our] desire is to entertain original proposals and approaches to accomplish the activities requested," he said. "The language reflects that we did not want a cookie-cutter proposal."

DOT replied to Hatch, in a June 22 letter, that, since legislation requires DOT to honor the initial program's contract, "only a limited amount of funding remains uncommitted. ... Because of this lack of funds, only two cities will be able to participate under [the follow-on contract]."

A request for vendor bids for one of those two cities -- Dallas/Forth Worth -- was issued June 22.

Traffic.com officials said the company supports the goals of the transportation technology program "and welcomes the opportunity to offer our solutions as the USDOT considers future deployments and expansion."

Hatch is "going to keep fighting for this," Hatch spokesman Peter Carr said on Friday.

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