# A Black-Led Bikeshare Company Is Charting A New Course In Youngstown, Ohio

## YoGo Bikeshare is bringing e-bikes to the Midwest city through business loans and local investment, instead of corporate sponsorship.

CINNAMON JANZER DECEMBER 30, 2022

YoGo Bikeshare president Ronnell Elkins was inspired by D.C.'s Capital Bikeshare. (Photo courtesy YoGo Bikeshare)

From protecting the planet to serving the public of entire cities with accessible and affordable transportation options, the missions of bikeshare services across the country and around the

world are often broad. They're intended to serve large swaths of a population, yet people of color, low-income folks, and others from marginalized communities are often left out as services bend toward wealthier and whiter neighborhoods and urban centers.

Most bikeshares also rely on corporate sponsorships for their existence. When this critical financial support evaporates at the whims of said corporation, as has recently happened in the Twin Cities, the service itself is jeopardized.

In Youngstown, Ohio, a local family is looking to do things differently in their hometown.

YoGo Bikeshare, which is set to launch its fleet of e-bikes in March 2023, will be the first bikeshare in the small Midwestern city – a steel town located halfway between Cleveland and Pittsburgh – of just over 60,000 people. Unlike most other bikeshares, YoGo is a family-owned, Black-led local business that got started with a $174,000 loan it secured through the Youngstown Business Incubator. That loan, alongside a personal $5,000 investment from both YoGo president Ronnell Elkins and his business partner and father, Kent Wallace, comprised the business' entire startup capital.

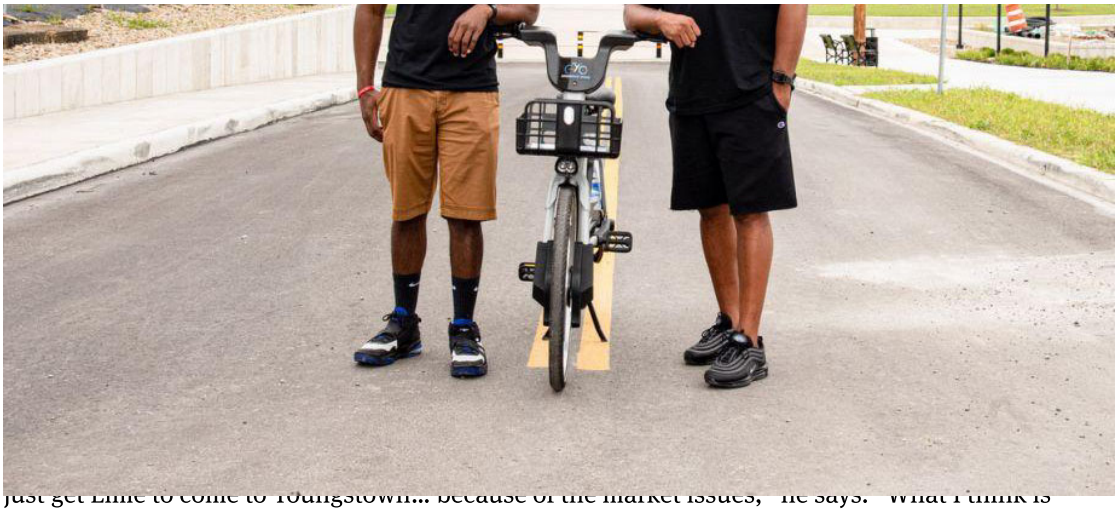
"We're family-owned, and we really pride ourselves on that," Elkins says of the business he runs with his dad and two brothers. Plus, Elkins and his family, like 41% of Youngstown's population, are Black. "We look like the demographic in our area, but we wanted to roll this out and execute it in a way where the city as a whole can be proud of it whether you're Black, white or whatever ethnicity."

When it launches in the spring, the micromobility company will begin by installing docking stations at four locations throughout the city's downtown. E-bikes will be available to rent at a price of $4 per 20 minutes, or $90 for a year-long subscription. The service will operate from 7:45 a.m. through 10 p.m. daily, between late spring and late autumn.

**Learn more about YoGo's work in our upcoming Solutions of the Year webinar on ways to increase ebike access.**

The idea first came to Elkins when he was visiting Washington, D.C., with his family in 2017. He found the city's Capital Bikeshare inspiring (though a 2016 survey found that just 4% of bikeshare members were Black, in a city where close to half of residents are Black) and thought that something similar could work in Youngstown. But the idea remained simply an idea until 2020 when the extra free time brought by the pandemic allowed him to turn it into reality.

YoGo isn't the first attempt to bring bikeshare to his hometown. "The company they were trying to hire didn't deem Youngstown a viable area for them to launch bike sharing," he says.



just get Lime to come to Youngstown... because of the market issues," he says. "What I think is interesting [about YoGo] is that you have local buy-in. You have people that live in the town trying to serve the people they know well."

In 2022, hundreds of audience members voted to award YoGo $5,000 prize during the Youngstown Business Incubator's "Shark Tank"-style pitch event. "We like to say that YoGo Bikeshare was built from the community, for the community," Elkins told media afterward.

The incubator experience helped Elkins push the idea over the finish line by helping YoGo secure their loan, find an insurer, and make connections to supporters across town. What's made YoGo work where other efforts have failed is their locally-focused approach.

That's not the only thing YoGo has gotten right, though. Going the e-bike route, as YoGo has, is supported by MacArthur's research. Not only do e-bikes allow users to travel further distances by bike more easily, but they can also be a better option for some people with mobility restrictions than can make riding a traditional bike difficult.

The research has also backed another strategy that YoGo has undertaken: using a diverse set of people in their imagery.

"If an individual sees an African American woman who's 40 using the system, it makes another African American woman who's 40" better able to see themselves using the bikeshare system, MacArthur says. This, he says, is where ambassador programs can make a difference when it comes to engagement.

But for Elkins, YoGo is about more than just micro-mobility. He hopes that his efforts to start a new business in the city will inspire others to follow suit. It's rare and recent for companies outside of the city's deep history in the steel and manufacturing industries to pop up.

"It's like, alright man, these guys are stepping out and doing something new... and they look like us. So why can't we do other things? Why can't we open a 3D printing business?" Elkins says. "So that's the psychological change we're trying to bring into our area."

*This story has been corrected to state that the Shark Tank-style pitch event happened in 2022, not 2021.*

*Cinnamon Janzer is a freelance journalist based in Minneapolis. Her work has appeared in National Geographic, U.S. News & World Report, Rewire.news, and more. She holds an MA in Social Design, with a specialization in intervention design, from the Maryland Institute College of Art and a BA in Cultural Anthropology and Fine Art from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.*

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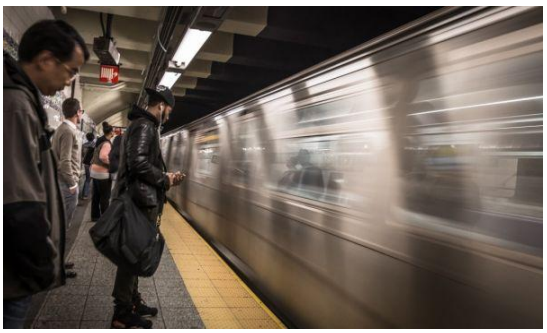

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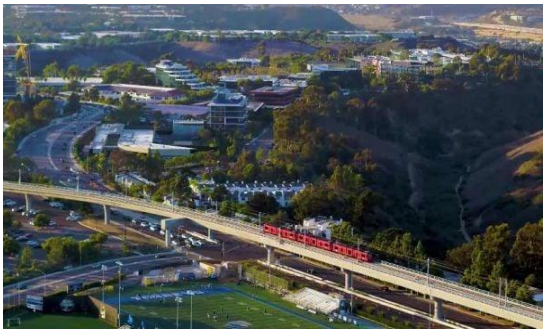

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# Should federal grants favor highway repair over expansion?


MATT YORK AP

Traffic moves along the notoriously congested stretch of Interstate 10 through tribal land called the Wild Horse Pass Corridor in Chandler, Ariz., on Wednesday. With the Gila River Indian Community's backing, Arizona allocated or raised about $600 million of a nearly $1 billion plan that would widen the most bottleneck-inducing, 26-mile section of I-10 on the route between Phoenix and Tucson. But its request for federal money to finish the job fell short — a victim of the highly competitive battle for transportation grants under the new infrastructure law.

BY JEFF MCMURRAY
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Arizona officials refer to a notoriously congested stretch of desert highway through tribal land as the Wild Horse Pass Corridor, a label that's less about horses than the bustling casino by the same name located just north of where the interstate constricts to four lanes.

With the Gila River Indian Community's backing, the state allocated or raised about $600 million of a nearly $1 billion plan that would widen the most bottleneck-inducing, 26-mile section of I-10 on the route between Phoenix and Tucson.

But its bid for federal grant money under the new infrastructure law to finish the job fell short, leaving some advocates for road construction accusing the Biden administration of devaluing those projects to focus on repairs and mass transit.

"Upset would be the right terminology," Casa Grande Mayor Craig McFarland said of his reaction when he learned the project won't receive one of the law's first Mega Grants the U.S. Department of Transportation will announce this week. "We thought we had done a good job putting the proposal together. We thought we had checked all the boxes."

The historic federal investment in infrastructure has reenergized dormant transportation projects, but the debate over how to prioritize them has only intensified in the 14 months since President Joe Biden signed the measure.

The law follows decades of neglect in maintaining the nation's roads, bridges, water systems and airports. Research by Yale University economist Ray Fair estimates a sharp decline in U.S. infrastructure investment has caused a $5.2 trillion shortfall. The entire law totals $1 trillion, and it seeks to not only remedy that dangerous backlog of projects but also build out broadband internet nationwide and protect against damage caused by climate change.

Some of the money, however, has gone to new highway construction — much of it from the nearly 30% increases Arizona and most other states are receiving over the next five years in the formula funding they can use to prioritize their own transportation needs.

For specific projects, many of the biggest awards available under the law are through various highly competitive grants. The Department of Transportation received around $30 billion worth of applications for just the first $1 billion in Mega Grants being awarded, spokesperson Dani Simons said.

Another $1 billion will be available each of the next four years before the funding runs out. Still, the first batch has been closely watched for signals about the administration's preferences.

Jeff Davis, senior fellow at the Eno Center for Transportation, said it's already clear that the Biden administration plans to direct a greater share of its discretionary transportation funding to "non-highway projects" than the Trump administration did. However, with so much more total infrastructure money to work with, Davis said, "a rising tide lifts all boats."

For example, one of the projects that the administration told Congress it had chosen for a Mega Grant will widen Interstate 10 — but in Mississippi, not Arizona. Davis said the department likely preferred the Mississippi project due to its significantly lower price tag. This year's Mega Grants combine three different award types into a single application, one of which caters specifically to rural and impoverished communities.

Some of the winning grants are for bridges, while others are for mass transit — including improvements to Chicago's commuter train system and concrete casing for a rail tunnel in Midtown Manhattan.

Along with the nine projects selected, transportation department staff listed seven others as "highly recommended" — a distinction Davis said makes them clear front-runners to secure money next year. Arizona's I-10 widening effort was part of a third group of 13 projects labeled as "recommended," which Davis said could put them in contention for future funding unless they're surpassed by even stronger applicants.

But such decisions remain largely subjective.

Advocates for regions such as the Southwest, where the population is growing but more spread out, argue that their need for new or wider highways is just as big of a national priority as a major city's need for more subway stations or bicycle lanes.

Arizona state Rep. Teresa Martinez, a Republican who represents Casa Grande at the southern end of the corridor, said she was livid when she heard from a congressional office that the administration might have turned down the I-10 project because it didn't have enough "multimodal" components.

"What does that even mean?" she said. "... They were looking to fund projects that have bike paths and trailways instead of a major interstate?"

Testifying in March before the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg assured Arizona Democratic U.S. Sen. Mark Kelly that he understood the state's unique highway needs and that his department wouldn't "stand in the way of a capacity expansion where it's appropriate."

Some Republicans, however, remain skeptical, in part due to a memo the Federal Highway Administration distributed in December 2021, a month after Biden signed the bill. The document suggested states should usually "prioritize the repair, rehabilitation, reconstruction, replacement, and maintenance of existing transportation infrastructure" over new road construction.

Although administration officials dismissed the memo as an internal communication, not a policy decision, critics alleged they were trying to circumvent Congress and influence highway construction decisions traditionally left to states under their formula funding.

Last month the Government Accountability Office concluded the memo carried the same weight as a formal rule, which Congress could challenge by passing a resolution of disapproval. Sen. Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, the ranking Republican on the Environment and Public Works Committee, pledged to write one.

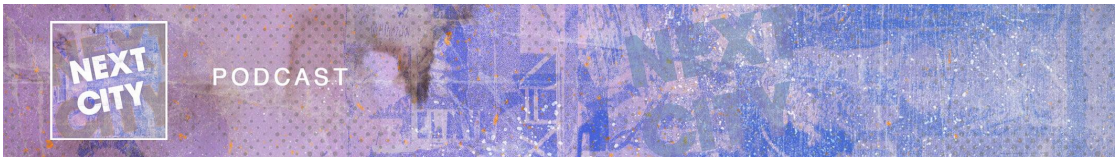
According to figures the Federal Highway Administration provided to The Associated Press, 12 capacity-expansion projects have received funding through previous competitive grants since the memo was issued. States also have used their formula funding toward 763 such projects totaling $7.1 billion.

As for the Arizona project, some state officials have expressed plans to move ahead on their own if they can't secure federal money — although they're not giving up on that, either. Considering that one crash can back up traffic for miles between the state's two largest cities, they say it remains a top priority.

McFarland, the Casa Grande mayor, said perhaps the next application will stress some of the other components of the $360 million request besides the highway widening — including bike lanes that tribal leaders have long sought for some of the overpasses.

"If you read the tea leaves, you can see where they're at," McFarland said. "... It's a competitive process. You don't always get it the first time you ask for it. So, ask again."

*Associated Press writer Josh Boak in Washington contributed to this story.*




# They Built 335 Miles Of Bike Lanes In 24 Months

## Who says change can't happen quickly? One group says they've figured out the playbook for fast-tracking bike lanes.

PODCAST | FEBRUARY 15, 2023

New bike infrastructure in New Orleans. (Photo courtesy City Thread)

The opposition to bike infrastructure gets outsized attention that prevents progress, according to organizers who are rapidly building bike lanes in multiple U.S. cities. They want the political megaphone handed instead to supporters by involving them in the planning process.

In this episode of the podcast, Next City Executive Director Lucas Grindley talks with journalist Yasmin Garaad about her reporting on a program called The Final Mile, featured in her Next City story titled "How Five U.S. Cities Built 335 Miles of Bike Lanes in 24 Months."

We also meet Kyle Wagenschutz, now a partner with City Thread, who helped lead that breakthrough in Austin, Denver, New Orleans, Pittsburgh and Providence. He says advances aren't stalled because practical solutions are missing.

"The primary reason that cities aren't moving forward isn't because they can't solve those operational challenges, it's because the politics aren't working," says Wagenschutz. "The mechanism by which cities actually build things in the public space — like how we actually sort of create and transform our cities in new ways — is a political process. And the system of politics in our communities is actually broken. It's built on creating adversarial relationships between people that should be working together."

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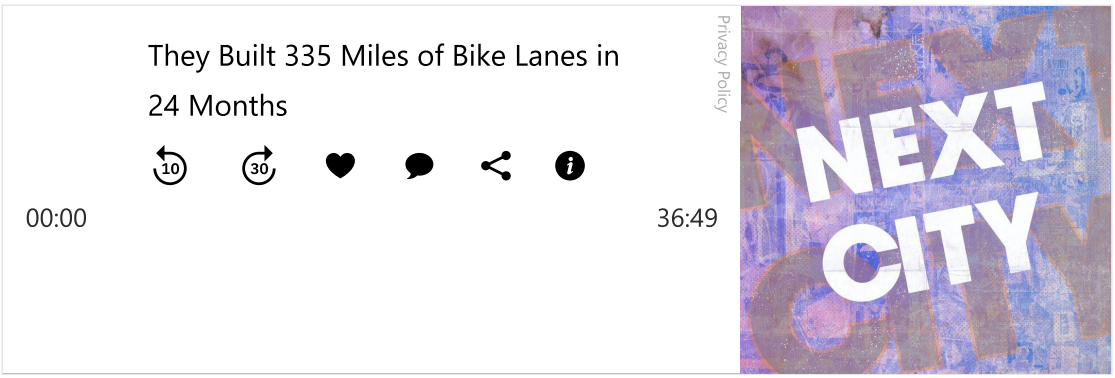


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