

TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

Federal Credit Fridays: Independent Financial Advisors (October 2026)

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00:00:00 Intro

Connecting you with thought leaders and experts in federal loan programs, this is Federal Credit Fridays with your host, Anthony Curcio.

00:00:12 Anthony Curcio

Hello, I'm Anthony Curcio and welcome to another episode of Federal Credit Fridays. Today's episode is going to be a little bit different. Typically, this podcast focuses on federal credit programs, lending authorities, underwriting practices, risk management, and the agencies responsible for deploying billions of dollars in federal financing. Usually we invite government officials, lenders, financial advisors, and industry experts to help us better understand how these programs work. But today we're going to take a step back, discuss a challenge that we've repeatedly observed in the federal credit marketplace itself. Over the last several years, federal credit programs have experienced tremendous growth. We've talked about that on this podcast. Agencies across government are supporting increasingly complex transactions involving infrastructure, housing, manufacturing, energy, transportation, a number of different asset classes. At the same time, private sector borrowers and developers and sponsors are showing greater interest in accessing growing federal loan programs.

00:01:18 Anthony Curcio

What we found is there's often a gap between these two worlds. Let me explain. Many organizations on the private side have sophisticated project finance experience, investment expertise, and operational experience. However, they may not fully understand how federal credit programs evaluate risk and structure transactions and navigate their statutory requirements. They're driven by the law and by OMB circulars. Conversely, agencies on the federal side, these programs have a deep knowledge of federal credit lending budget rules and underwriting standards, but often lack a firm understanding of how sponsors and borrowers and investors approach transactions in the private market.

00:01:58 Anthony Curcio

The result is that both sides can be working towards the same objective while speaking slightly different languages or dialects. Today's conversation is about that gap, why it exists, and what

could be done to bridge it. To help me explore that topic, I'm joined by Negin Shakibi, the founder of Savalon and the managing member of Ascend, a joint venture between Summit and Savalon. Through Negin's work with private sector clients, she has spent years helping organizations navigate complex financial, strategic, and operational challenges while increasingly working with firms who seek to understand how to access federal financing opportunities. Many listeners know me from my work at Summit. as a senior partner, where much of my career has focused on federal credit programs themselves, as we guide those agencies. That experience provides a different perspective on the same marketplace, ultimately brought Negin and I together, or should I say Savalon and Summit. was a shared observation. Organizations are increasingly seeking advisors who understand both sides of the transaction.

00:03:02 Anthony Curcio

They want advisors who understand how federal credit programs make decisions, but who also understand the realities that are facing project sponsors, investors, and developers. That observation ultimately led us to create Ascend. This episode is not really about forming a joint venture, though. It's really about the market need that inspired it. We're going to discuss in a brief time that we have together the challenges that we see in today's federal credit environment, the disconnects that sometimes or often exist between public and private participants, and why bringing together complementary perspectives create better outcomes for our clients, the projects, and definitely the project sponsors themselves. Well, without anything further, Negin, welcome to the podcast.

00:03:48 Negin Shakibi

Thank you, Anthony. It's great to be here.

00:03:50 Anthony Curcio

Well, it's been a while that we've been thinking about doing this, but I'm glad we finally figured it out.

00:03:56 Negin Shakibi

Yep. Looking forward to it.

00:03:58 Anthony Curcio

Great. Well, I think you heard my intro there. So there's so much to talk about. But, you know, let's start with the problem itself. From your perspective, and I know that both of us have encountered private sector clients and both of us have encountered public sector clients, but I think your expertise and background of you and your experts bring something unique as it relates to the private sector. What are you seeing in the marketplace that signals that there's a need for a different kind of advisory model.

00:04:26 Negin Shakibi

Well, we actually saw this gap from the federal side first. Like Summit, as you said, we've been serving as independent financial advisors. to these federal credit programs for a few years now. And we review the applications, build and assess the financial models and evaluate the credit worthiness of applicants, which gives us this front review of where some of the private applicants struggle. We saw these capable sponsors who know how to build and finance complex projects, submit applications that weren't really complete or cases that weren't framed the way the federal program evaluates risk. And this always leads to a lot of back and forth, deficiency in responses didn't quite answer the question right, and it just kind of slows down the process. And we thought that, you know, if you're better prepared, it would like avoid a lot of these issues. At the same time, as you said, these federal credit programs were becoming more visible. The public private partnerships were increasing in popularity for infrastructure projects. So more of these private players were coming to the table because the federal programs offered better terms, lower

00:05:36 Negin Shakibi

terms, more flexibility than the commercial markets did. So we saw this growing demand from companies that didn't quite speak the language yet. And we know from the evaluation side, what a strong creditworthy application looks like. we kind of decided to bring all that perspective to the private side. And that's why I brought on Christy David, who is our project finance practice lead, to grow this work. And she brings decades of experience, not only as an IFA to the federal credit programs, but also advising sponsors, developers, public entities through programs like TIFIA, DOE, EXIM Bank, those kinds of programs. So this dual perspective is exactly what we brought her to lead this practice. because she knows what a program wants to see, how to build the financing case that gets there the first time around, which is why we brought us together too.

00:06:27 Anthony Curcio

Absolutely. Well, let me chime in there and again, I promise I wouldn't make you talk the whole time, but I. I see many of the same things. And as we've known each other for a while, I see the same gap through a different perspective. some things that I see on my side of the table are a lot of credit policy or credit product design decisions that will attract a certain kind of a borrower. And I think that from the perspective that our joint venture and exposure and anticipation of the private market bring, is that when we institute certain processes that let's say, I'll give you a quick example, I won't mention any names, but one particular infrastructure credit program within the government had a really, really long application window. I mean, it was like really long. And they thought one of the reasons it was so long is that more credit review or more thorough review would lead to better outcomes and more mitigated credit risk. And what we ended up seeing is that the review time was so long that we were effectively screening out the better credit quality opportunities because they just simply couldn't wait that long. We were left with a lower credit quality applicant pool because those are the only ones desperate enough to wait that long. And I think that there is sometimes a misunderstanding on the federal

00:07:46 Anthony Curcio

about the trade-offs between certain terms and conditions and the type of borrower that you're going to get. Another example that we have seen, and I talked about this in a previous episode of this podcast, is that sometimes as we're designing credit terms, we will try to mitigate or compensate for credit risk with a higher interest rate, which is exactly what the private market does. And there is limited application to that, but there is clearly not the same appetite for that in the public sector want to find credit worthy projects and we want to provide them as low as an interest rate as possible as opposed to substantial markups. That's another distinction. So I found it really interesting is bringing that public sector perspective to new appointees who have a private sector background or helping public sector decision makers understand the way the private sector applicant community and sponsor community is going to react to these terms and conditions. So it's sort of like bringing those two perspectives together, not only outside of the building, but also inside of the building.

00:08:49 Negin Shakibi

Yeah, yeah, makes sense.

00:08:51 Anthony Curcio

Well, remind us of some of the transaction. I know you and your team have a pretty broad transaction experience as it relates to federal credit. Tell us about some of the places that your team's coming from and the kind of transactions that inform your experience.

00:09:06 Negin Shakibi

Like you were saying, because we bring both sides of the table together. I'll just speak to the couple of private examples where we've supported the private side. Right now we're working on working with a municipality on a subway line extension that's looking for creative infrastructure financing. So we're in there advising them on their options and how we can help them navigate the process. Another example is something Christy worked on with a private developer entering into a P3 arrangement. with the municipality. And this was to redevelop a city building around a major transit hub to revitalize their downtown area. And the developer hired her team to evaluate, again, alternate financing options, including borrowing from Build America Bureau's TIFIA program and then through the entire application process. So because we can take them through the full life cycle from eligibility and fit because of the understanding of the programs that are available and then building the financing case, going through the application process and helping through underwriting negotiations and through close and even post-close monitoring if they want it.

00:10:20 Anthony Curcio

So when I think about what the summit perspective that pairs with that well, and you and I've talked about this before, but when I look at our experience within the energy infrastructure and

industrial policy space, I can't believe it, but we've been at this for 20. Where does the time go, right? But to prep for this, I looked over some of the programs and project sponsors. We've almost \$200 billion. Airlines, toll roads, bridges, clearly energy fabrication credits and projects. It's been quite a ride. And as you can imagine, that has come from DFC, our international development credit agency for the United States, also energy dominance financing program with the Department of Energy and EPA's water infrastructure program and many other. There's also some philanthropic in there as well. So we have gotten a broad perspective. We've also helped to set up 15 new loan and grant programs for energy infrastructure and industrial policy in the last decade. And that has been a lot of capital deployed. And as you know, these programs are becoming more and more popular in an era where our infrastructure crisis or infrastructure needs are really being grappled by policymakers from both sides of the aisle. Ten years ago, we used to joke about infrastructure, but nobody's laughing anymore. It's really happening. And so we could always use more, but it's definitely moving now. But it's interesting because I think both the federal side of infrastructure and the project sponsor side of infrastructure, we've seen them come together quite a lot in those programs over the last 20 years now. Can't believe it?

00:11:53 Negin Shakibi

Our teams just bring so much. So many different perspectives to these deals, and we do a lot together, which is great.

00:12:00 Anthony Curcio

Yeah, let's try to conjure in our minds sort of the ideal client or the ideal project or project sponsor, or the ideal perhaps credit agency to give a sense of how Summit and Savillon. have come together to ascend, what would be the ideal client in that situation? What do you think, Negin?

00:12:19 Negin Shakibi

Well, on the federal side, it's what we've been doing, right? That's SWFIA, FTA, you know, some of these other ones where we help assess the applicant and kind of go through that process from the government side. But on the private side, I'd say it's a sponsor, developer, or an investor with a big project. I mean, it could be infrastructure, transit, real estate, something, and where the commercial market can't fully finance it on workable terms for them. So if you were to ask, am I a good candidate? I would say, yeah. Do you have a capital gap on your large project? Do you suspect there's a federal credit program that could help, but you don't know which one applies? Are you in some sort of P3 arrangement or hope to be? Are you new to the federal credit area? We want to avoid these mistakes that are made that could make things difficult. We can support that. And then if you want an advisory team that could take you from start to finish through the whole thing without having advisors for different aspects of that, I'd say, then you come to us. We can help you with that.

00:13:30 Anthony Curcio

Absolutely. When I think about it from my perspective, one of the ideal client, the characteristics of an ideal client for me is going to be a program and its applicant pool. And the thing that I remind myself a lot, and I say it often in this podcast, is that the United States has one of the most robust capital markets and probably, well, most robust capital market in the world. It is not hard to find financing in the United In fact, it's easier here than anywhere else. And so one often wonders, what role does the federal government play in financing in a place where financing is the best in the world and the most liquid in the world? And the answer that I've found many times is for a type of asset class where the government is leaning into its, where policymakers are leaning into their superpowers to create terms and conditions that are different are distinct from what the private market financing sources would provide and leaning in matching between the federal superpowers and leaning in to the lever points of the project to make it come to market faster or to make it bigger or to increase its scale technologically speaking. So what I'm interested in really, and I think is helping policy makers and their applicant pools understand How can we not recreate what the private sector already does really well, but layer on top of that standard credit offering from the United States government that can move the needle for certain types of large projects or unique projects that are really critical to the nation's prosperity? So that makes it interesting. It's a standard field with non-standard terms and conditions. That I think is where we can really knock it out of the park. I'll give you one quick example. A lot of the reasons that U.S. STA's role development is able to lend effectively is because it has a broader perspective on what it can take as collateral, especially as it relates to unique issues like a native owned land, which is difficult for the private sector to figure out sometimes for credit, the extension of credit, or the ability to accept nonstandard financial statements from a nonprofit applicant or take certain types of state level appropriation risk. These are the kinds of unique

00:15:45 Anthony Curcio

things the government can, the federal government can do and building assets that don't look all that different from what the private market will do, but in ways that fill in gaps that it won't serve. Anyway, that was kind of long-winded, but that's what I think about when I think about our ideal client.

00:16:00 Negin Shakibi

Yeah, and because we also do corporate finance, it's the same thing, you know, helping companies get loans and some just may not know how to put that package together.

00:16:10 Anthony Curcio

Yes, I've seen for our clients often the assumption is, you know, let's take a a small community that needs a water system infrastructure credit. Oftentimes these communities are left out not because they're a bad credit risk, but because they literally don't know how to navigate the application process.

00:16:28 Negin Shakibi

Exactly. Yeah.

00:16:30 Anthony Curcio

City manager is retired or part-time or something like that. So those are the kinds of things where I think that we can help bring 2 perspectives together. Well, again, I think we've about run the clock out here, but I appreciate you joining me today and I'm excited about bringing these perspectives together to really do our part to support this national movement towards bigger and more professional credit programs.

00:16:55 Negin Shakibi

And it was very nice to be invited. Thank you for that. Yeah, this is very exciting work and I also look forward to continuing our partnership.

00:17:04 Anthony Curcio

Great. Well, maybe we'll get together again. Maybe we get together with our teams and look at some specific transactions at some point. That'd be a lot of fun if you're. Yeah, that'd be great.

00:17:15 Negin Shakibi

Thanks again. Thanks, Anthony.

00:17:17 Anthony Curcio

Thank you. This has been another episode of Federal Credit Fridays.