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Group criticizes ADOT federal stimulus list

By Mike Branom
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A lobbying organization thinks the Arizona Department of Transportation is heading down the wrong road.

State officials have compiled a list of projects that could be funded under a federal economic stimulus package, with an estimated total price tag of \$1.2 billion. But the Arizona Public Interest Research Group thinks this list is too heavy on black asphalt with not enough green alternatives.

"Arizona should be spending more on public transit, which not only would create more jobs, but would also reduce traffic, air pollution, and our dependence on oil," AZ PIRG spokesman Alex Nelson said in a statement released Wednesday.

But ADOT spokesman Doug Nintzel said the report was premature, in that no one knows what form a stimulus package will take. He also said some of PIRG's accusations were misguided, in that ADOT doesn't do much with transit.

"We're not a transit operator," Nintzel said, although he acknowledged ADOT's roles in transit planning and distribution of transit funding.

In the Valley, Maricopa County and its municipalities are responsible for transit.

The Maricopa Association of Governments, in its federal wish list, has compiled more than \$1.8 billion worth of transit projects. That represents nearly 26 percent of the total cost for all of MAG's projects.

The criticism of ADOT was part of a national effort by PIRG to shift the emphasis toward transit and away from roads and highways.

PIRG examined the lists of transportation projects on which funds could be spent if made available from 18 states, including Arizona, constituting 56 percent of the U.S. population. The organization said the average state would spend more than 77 percent of funds on highways and only 17 percent on public transit or intercity rail.

Arizona has a highways-to-transit funding request ratio of \$869 million to \$8.5 million, making it one of seven states studied allocating 1 percent or less to transit, PIRG said.

Nelson said Arizona is missing a big opportunity in not asking for a study of a Phoenix-Tucson passenger rail line to be funded. The federal government already has pledged matching funds for such a study, if it is ever undertaken.

But the state and local officials have said the federal government's emphasis is directed toward projects that

are “shovel-ready” – and that rail line is definitely not.

PIRG also criticized Arizona and other states for their emphasis on the construction of new roads and highways, rather than the repair and improvement of what already exists. Nelson said the economic impact of maintenance is 9 percent greater than new construction, as much of the latter’s costs stem from the acquisition of land.



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