

EXPLORER

NEWS

Giffords questioned about stimulus plan

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Local leaders worry red tape will tie up federal cash

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With as much as \$800 billion up for grabs, regional leaders were keen to hear how they might get their fair shares out of President-elect Barack Obama's proposed economic stimulus package.

Officials from several Southern Arizona communities were on hand last Saturday at Tucson's Eastside City Hall, where Democratic U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords held a forum on the incoming president's plan.

The president-elect has said the money would go primarily toward roadway improvements and other infrastructure projects.

At stake for many here, though, including Oro Valley Mayor Paul Loomis and Marana Mayor Ed Honea, was how the money will find its way to local coffers and to whom local leaders should forward their project-funding wish lists.

Many local governments in Giffords 8th Congressional District already have sent such [lists](#) to her office, including Oro Valley, Marana, Tucson and Pima County.

But Giffords implied that she's limited in what strings she can pull. The money likely will come in the form of block grants, which will be administered by state agencies, she explained.

The Arizona Department of Transportation in particular could play a leading role in doling out economic stimulus money.

If that's the case, then local governments would have to lobby state lawmakers on behalf of local projects.

"State legislators across Arizona will have to work to make sure their voices are heard," Giffords said.

Some officials raised concerns that Maricopa County might swallow most of the money that could come Arizona's way.

ADOT Board Chairman Si Schorr, who represents Pima County, suggested one way to prevent that from happening would be to adhere to the transportation department's funding breakdown, the so-called Casa Grande Accord.

Under that agreement, Maricopa County receives 37 percent of state highway funds, Pima gets 13 percent, and the rest of the counties divvy up the remaining 50 percent.

"If it veers very far from that mathematical formula, there will be some very unhappy people," Schorr said.



Patrick McNamara/The Explorer, ADOT Director Victor Mendez and U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords last Saturday met with the region's leaders to discuss President-elect Obama's proposed economic stimulus plan and how Southern Arizona can benefit from the estimated \$750-billion package.

But, even before federal lawmakers write the first draft of the proposed stimulus package, some local leaders worry that the money could get tied up in bureaucratic red tape.

Cochise County Supervisor Richard Searle raised the point, later echoed by other regional leaders, that money allocated at the state level for local projects often takes years to wind its way through the maze of legal and procedural requirements.

Searle points to Davis Road, a 15-mile rural thoroughfare between highways 80 and 191 near Tombstone.

Former Congressman Jim Kolbe, Giffords' predecessor, four years ago secured \$3 million in federal money for the county to resurface the road.

"A shovel has not been turned on that project yet," Searle said.

He blames ADOT for the delay and thinks much of Obama's stimulus money could get held up in state bureaucracies as well.

"This \$700 billion could get tied up and not get to the municipalities for two years," Searle said.

Giffords stressed that the best way for local governments to ensure speedy delivery of money would be to make sure their projects are ready to go.

Oro Valley, for example, included on its projects list the already-under-construction Municipal Operations Complex in Rancho Vistoso and the long-planned-for Naranja Town Site park.

"The projects had to be ready to begin," Oro Valley Assistant Town Manager Jerene Watson said.

Marana officials also included projects currently planned or those already approved by voters.

The list they submitted includes money for the Twin Peaks interchange project. That project is part of the \$2.1 billion Regional Transportation Authority package voters approved in 2004.

Pima County officials seek \$80 million for a new courthouse complex. ([Click here for a list of Pima County requests.](#)) .

County voters approved selling bonds for the court complex in 2004. But, when it came time to start construction, county officials realized the \$76 million allocated for the project wouldn't cover the costs, which have more than doubled to \$155 million.

"If we even get one project, that would free up funds in our general fund," Oro Valley's Watson said.

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