

Ariz. gearing up for US money for transportation

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The jockeying for dollars and jobs is under way as Arizona officials are setting an aggressive timetable to pick nearly \$600 million of transportation projects for funding under the federal recovery package.

A Department of Transportation timeline sketched out Thursday by Director Victor Mendez anticipates federal approval of the recovery package by Feb. 13 and on-the-ground work starting on Arizona projects by May 13, just three months later.

In between, the state would prioritize projects, put them out for bid and award contracts, nearly all of which would be for highway work though some aviation projects also could get money.

The more than 100 highway and road projects under consideration total more than \$940.2 million and include widening freeways, repaving existing routes, refurbishing bridges and installing new signs and lighting.

Briefing the state Transportation Board and other officials on how it looks like the still-developing program will work, Mendez said

federal funding will require that work start promptly to produce jobs. If not, funding will be withdrawn.

"We will focus on ready-to-go projects," Mendez said. "You've heard the term shovel ready.' That is what we'll be looking at."

The Transportation Board is starting to consider which projects to approve for funding, and some board members as well as local officials indicated they have preferences for the dollars available.

A Maricopa Association of Governments official said Phoenix-area widening projects for Interstate 10 and Interstate 17 that were just pulled off an acceleration list because of state budget cuts should be given top priority for federal funding before a statewide formula is applied.

And a Pima Association of Governments official said the regional council has identified several freeway interchange projects that should be on the state's list but aren't.

Mendez said the board needs to decide whether and how to allot the recovery money for highway work geographically, and whether to do that by dollars, jobs created or both. New construction and highway widening creates more jobs than repaving, he added.

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The \$590 million expected for highway and road work represents a doubling of what the state normally gets from the federal government, Mendez said.

After \$27 million is taken off the top, according to Mendez, use of an existing statewide funding approach as a guide would direct \$254 million to Maricopa County projects, \$87 million to Pima County projects and \$222 million to projects in the other 13 counties. An alternative scenario would direct less to Maricopa County and Pima County projects and more to projects elsewhere, Mendez said.

Along with road projects, 63 aviation projects at 19 airports have been identified by ADOT for possible funding with recovery package dollars. Those projects have a total pricetag of nearly \$353.7 million, but the department figures the state could get \$100 million in federal money.

One hitch on aviation projects is that the federal funding might require a 5 percent local match, which could be a barrier because of local governments' strapped finances, according to Mendez. "It's a real concern," he said.

The federal government also plans to provide some money for transit and rail projects but Mendez said it's not known where that money would go.

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