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[Back to story](#)

[Back to KTAR.com Homepage](#)



Arizona board OKs road work for stimulus funding

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PHOENIX - The state Transportation Board gave the green light Tuesday to using federal stimulus money for highway projects in Maricopa and Pima counties and also gave initial backing for an equal amount of work across the rest of the state.

The board approved one Arizona Department of Transportation list of five projects in Maricopa County, including construction of new lanes on Interstate 10 west of Phoenix and Interstate 17 near Anthem, and another for eight projects in Pima County. Those include work on Interstates 10 and 19 and State Route 86 west of Tucson.

A 27-project list for the 13 counties accounts also was endorsed, but board members specifically left the door open to reconsider its project rankings after more consultation with local officials.

If the initial 13-county project lists hold up, allotments would include \$6.6 million for work in Yavapai County, \$16.5 million in Cochise County, \$30 million in Pinal County, \$20 million in Coconino County, \$15 million in Mohave County and \$11.5 million in Yuma County.

However, those figures could change because ADOT officials and board members plan to keep evaluating additional projects in all three regions in the running for possible stimulus funding in case approved projects are dropped or if the state gets more federal dollars.

At least for now, 55 percent of the total spending statewide would be for construction to add or expand roadways, while 29 percent would be for repaving and other "preservation" work and 16 percent for rehabilitation and replacement projects.

The 13-county projects list endorsed Tuesday produced some grumbling with Yuma Mayor Larry Nelson saying ADOT's listed \$11.5 million cost for a U.S. 95 widening project is well short of the city's estimate of over \$19 million. "I am extremely disappointed in what I see," Nelson said.

The stimulus programs goal is to spur the economy by creating jobs, and ADOT officials said criteria they used to recommend projects included their ability to be launched quickly and a desire to have both a mix of work and to spread around the state.

One federally mandated criteria causing some uncertainty for state officials is a requirement to consider giving priority to "economically depressed areas," a designation that for now includes every county but for Coconino, Maricopa and Pima, said ADOT Director John Halikowski.

The action on ADOT's lists of recommended projects came after the board reaffirmed an earlier decision to spend half of the state's \$350 million in Maricopa and Pima counties and half in the other 13 counties.

Under that starting point, Maricopa County would be allowed approximately \$130 million and Pima County roughly \$45 million. Approximately \$175 million would be divvied up among projects in the other counties.

"While we understand that Maricopa County is the center of the universe for Arizona, it's not the center of the universe for rural Arizona," said Santa Cruz County Supervisor Manuel "Manny" Ruis, one of many local officials who urged the board to leave the 50-50 split unchanged.

Growing communities around the state need attention - and dollars - too, said Larry Clark, Havasu City public works director. ``We're really not necessarily rural Arizona anymore."

Maricopa Association of Government officials unsuccessfully asked that roughly \$75 million for the I-10 and I-17 work be provided right off the top - before splitting the money regionally - because previously approved state funding for the projects was lost in January budget cuts.

``We're just looking for some fundamental fairness," said Dennis Smith, MAG executive director.