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States race to use transportation project funds

Michael Cooper, New York Times

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Kansas will widen U.S. 69 to remove a bottleneck outside Kansas City, along with a few other expensive projects. Maryland will spend its money in smaller pieces, resurfacing dozens of rutted roads and highways. Colorado will build an interchange on Elk Creek Road in Jefferson County, complete with an underpass for the elk.

There is nothing monumental in President Obama's plan to revive the economy with a coast-to-coast building spree, no historic New Deal-style public works. The goal of the stimulus plan was to put people to work quickly, and so states across the country have begun to spend nearly \$50 billion on thousands of smaller transportation projects that could employ up to 400,000 people, by the administration's estimates.

More than a dozen states have now said how they plan to spend at least some of their transportation money, giving the clearest picture yet of how one of the president's signature programs is playing out around the country.

Beyond all the money for Medicaid and unemployment benefits in the huge bill passed in February, this will be the face of America's stimulus program: a rural bridge will be painted, a new lane added on a suburban highway, a guardrail built on a median strip.

They may be old plans that the recession had forced a state to shelve, but multiplied by thousands, they will quickly get bulldozers rolling again and paychecks flowing. On the highway projects alone, the White House said Tuesday that 150,000 jobs would be created or saved.

Some states are taking radically different approaches with their transportation money. While Kansas is using it on a few big marquee projects to expand capacity at several highways, Maryland has adopted a fix-it-first policy, and plans to use its money to repair dozens of roads and bridges instead of building new ones.

States have tremendous latitude in how they spend the money, and in some places that is leading to pitched political battles - battles that must be waged quickly, because the states must begin spending the money in four months. Regional politics is playing a role in some states, as local lawmakers fight to get money sent to their districts.

Since the stimulus law provided much less money for transportation than many states had expected - less than \$50 billion, which is about what the federal government spends on transportation every year - the competition for those dollars can be particularly fierce.

Two schools of thought are emerging as states decide what to do with their shares.

Kansas decided to concentrate its money on a few new projects that its transportation secretary, Deb Miller, called "game changers." So it will spend nearly a quarter of its money building the next leg of a project to expand U.S. 69 in Overland Park, a bustling suburb of Kansas City. It will rebuild an interchange in Wichita in an area where developers want to put more retail space, rebuild a rural highway in Gove County that has heavy truck traffic, and complete a 10-year project to improve a corridor in McPherson County where work was stopped because the money had dried up.

Others argue that the money should be used to fix the crumbling infrastructure that already exists. They note that for years, many states have put off much-needed maintenance to save money, and that repair projects can be done quickly.

Maryland is taking the fix-it-first approach - and calls the \$638 million it will receive in stimulus money most welcome, given that the state was forced to defer \$2.1 billion worth of construction and repair projects when the economy soured. John Porcari, Maryland's transportation secretary, said the state would quickly put 10,000 people to work resurfacing dozens of roads, painting and repairing bridges and putting in guardrails.

"It's like maintaining your car: If you neglect the relatively easy periodic maintenance, you're building up to a very big bill - and eventually replacing it," Porcari said. "Instead of having one or two or three mega-projects, we have literally dozens and dozens of projects in every corner of the state, which maximizes the ability of local firms to compete for them."

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