



\$66 million from stimulus to fuel transit projects

Valley Metro to vote on how to divide funds

by **Kerry Fehr-Snyder** - Mar. 13, 2009 12:00 AM
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Add mass transit to the list of projects being stimulated by federal spending to lift the sagging economy.

The Valley is poised to cash in on \$66.4 million in stimulus funding, with Phoenix and the southeast Valley receiving the bulk of the money. The rest of the state would receive about \$34 million in stimulus funding for transit projects.

Valley Metro's Regional Public Transportation Authority board of directors is scheduled to vote on staff recommendations in Maricopa County next week. The Maricopa Association of Governments also will get a say at its regional council meeting later this month.

Next week's meeting will be the second at which the Valley Metro board has considered how to divvy up the funding. The board initially decided to back staff recommendations to fund projects that were supposed to be financed through the Proposition 400 half-cent-per-dollar sales tax, approved by Maricopa County voters in 2004. That fund is falling short of

projections as sales-tax revenue nosedives in the faltering economy.

But the Valley's stimulus-funding strategy could change, said Wayne Ecton, the board's chairman and a Scottsdale councilman.

The board now will consider whether to distribute the stimulus money based on population instead of by specific projects. That change in strategy would reward the largest cities but also could jeopardize the money because not all cities have projects ready to be funded. Money not spent within the federal timeline would be redistributed to other regions of the country.

The board's change of heart signals a fight is brewing among the cities that harkens back to the old East vs. West Valley.

"Initially, I thought we did the right thing because we don't have enough money to do everything in Prop. 400," Ecton said. "But when I listen to the arguments of giving the money out based on population, I think it will probably be changed."

One Valley Metro board member said he plans to stick to the original Proposition 400 priority list to live up to projects promised to voters.

"We're all supposed to be representing regional transportation," said board member

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Joe Johnson, who also is a Surprise City Council vice mayor. "Sometimes it's your city's turn; sometimes it's not your city's turn. Proceed with the plan.

"I'm not going to make it an East-West Valley thing."

Valley Metro, which oversees transit projects in the Valley, has been working with city transit directors since December on projects that would qualify for the federal stimulus funding.

The specific projects range from a \$10 million expansion of a Mesa transit facility to \$8 million in park-and-ride shade canopies. The largest single project would be a \$15 million bus rapid-transit project along Arizona Avenue in Chandler.

Phoenix would receive nearly \$14 million to build a park-and-ride facility at Happy Valley Road and Interstate 17 and \$10 million to upgrade and rehabilitate its main city bus depot, Central Station.

The transit stimulus money is relatively small compared with the \$350 million coming to the Arizona Department of Transportation for various "shovel-ready" freeway projects.

"Obviously, we're excited about any federal participation," said Paul Hodgins, manager of

capital programming for Valley Metro. "We're a little disappointed that it's just \$100 million because we were hoping for a little more for transit."

Because of the tight timetable, some transit projects, such as extending light rail, weren't considered. Federal environmental regulations weren't relaxed for the stimulus program, and light-rail extensions require extensive study of their environmental impacts.

Unlike the freeway stimulus money, which primarily is going to the West Valley, money for transit projects is aimed at the southeast Valley and Phoenix.

"It clearly shows that the transit projects are really in Phoenix and the East Valley, not really in the West Valley," Hodgins said.

Valley Metro staff reduced some requests based on whether they are far enough along in their development.

Chandler officials, for example, requested more than \$21.9 million for the Arizona Avenue bus rapid-transit project but the staff recommended only \$15 million in funding.

"It has to do with the state of readiness of that project," Hodgins said. "We couldn't put that in a federal grant and get the money

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because it's not ready enough."

Valley Metro staff also recommended that a request for park-and-ride shade canopies be cut by nearly half. The structures would be built to provide shade over cars that otherwise would sit exposed to the sun all day.

"It's probably not a huge job generator, but it's certainly a local job generator," Hodgins said. "Putting shades over cars may not seem like a glamorous thing, but it really helps the riders keep their cars cool when they park them."

If the projects are approved for federal funding, cities will save money they had set aside for them from Proposition 400.

"Anytime we can get federal money into the program, that's good," said Mike Normand, Chandler transportation planning and services manager. "It allows us to stretch our money farther."

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