

Next wave of stimulus up for grabs

State projects to vie for federal grants

by [Ronald J. Hansen and Pat Kossan](#) - Mar. 17, 2009
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Last week, Arizona transportation officials settled on 41 road projects to be built using federal stimulus money. They had a list of 114 eligible.

The list underscores a fundamental issue in President Barack Obama's \$787 billion plan to boost the economy: Even with the huge sums of money available, many eligible projects will go lacking.

From small water-treatment plants in the rural highland to traffic-choked highways in Phoenix, hundreds of Arizona projects did not receive any stimulus dollars.

At least not yet.

Officials in Arizona and nationwide now are looking beyond what aid their states are set to receive and are turning their attention toward winning competitive grants that are also in the legislation.

In Arizona, winning proposals could bring radical new methods of teaching, expanded transportation projects and the extension of

broadband Internet access to thousands who now lack it.

Program planning

Arizona educators are lining up their proposals for billions of dollars in competitive stimulus grants, which could help ease the pain of recent budget cuts or establish new areas of research expertise.

Nationwide, the grant winners will be states with big ideas where educators can quickly compromise and work together on multistate and multidistrict proposals. Awards will be weighted in favor of partnerships that link elementary schools with colleges and universities that are ready to help with research and teacher training.

"We're going to reward those states and those districts that are willing to challenge the status quo and get dramatically better," U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan said Monday at the White House.

Duncan has one of the largest amounts of competitive grant money, \$5 billion, available in the federal stimulus package. The Department of Education grants will be awarded to improve K-12 schools.

The Center for the Future of Arizona and the Arizona Department of Education are partnering with six other states to pilot large

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projects that would radically change the status quo in each state.

Changes could include eliminating the historical practice of children moving from grade to grade based mainly on age and replace it with a system that allows students to progress at their own pace in each subject.

"We started these discussions before all the talk of the stimulus," said the center's Sybil Francis, executive director of the non-profit public-policy research organization. "No one can promise anyone anything, but it's just exciting in the sense it energizes our efforts."

Smaller pots of money also are available. For example, about \$256 million is set aside for states ready to create teacher performance-pay systems, to train teachers to use technology as a primary teaching tool and to create a data system to track students from kindergarten through college and career training.

Funding for transit

The U.S. Department of Transportation has \$1.5 billion in general-purpose surface-transportation grants nationwide. No state can get more than \$300 million.

Many cities and states are likely to apply.

Phoenix Mayor Phil Gordon has suggested that the city could seek up to \$200 million to help speed construction of a "people mover" that shuttles passengers around Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport.

Wulf Grote, director of project development for Valley Metro, said the public-transportation agency also could seek up to \$200 million.

Laura Douglas, a spokeswoman for the Arizona Department of Transportation, which last week approved 41 stimulus-funded projects from a list of more than 100 eligible, said the department is trying to identify which grants could help pay for some of the remaining projects.

"There's so many pages to this act," Grote said of the 1,000-page stimulus. "We haven't been able to uncover it all yet."

Widening Web access

The Agriculture and Commerce departments will split \$7.2 billion in loans and grants to expand broadband Internet access in rural and underserved communities. Officials in Washington still are considering how the grants will work, so it's unclear whether states or private companies, or both, will seek the money. And the law says those that win the grants must cover 20 percent of the costs, though they could

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There are up to 2 million Arizonans without broadband service, said DJ Harper, a spokesman for the state's Government Information Technology Agency.

Private companies already are planning to seek some of the broadband grants. "We're continuing to grow regardless, but this will maybe help push that along a little bit in the rural areas," said Ivan Johnson, a vice president of community relations for Cox Communications.

Where the flow slows

In other grant areas, Arizona could find additional federal dollars harder to come by.

The U.S. Transportation Department, for example, has \$8 billion to develop high-speed rail, but Arizona has no projects ready to start within a few months, as required for stimulus money, and therefore won't receive any of those funds.

The same agency also has \$1.1 billion in grants for airport infrastructure projects that can be completed within two years.

Dennis Wiss, president of the Arizona Airports Association, said his conversations with the Federal Aviation Administration suggest the state would get little more than

\$15 million.

Phoenix and Tucson may be able to fund relatively modest projects, like improving a taxiway, Wiss said, although most small airports will get nothing.

"It honestly doesn't look like there's going to be much trickle down," Wiss said. "It's pretty disappointing."

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