

Road is clear for Valley highway projects

Stimulus funds to bring jobs, congestion relief to Valley

by *David Madrid* - Mar. 22, 2009 12:00 AM
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Jobs and congestion relief are on the way. And the timing couldn't be better.

Arizona's unemployment rate has risen to 7.4 percent, while the Legislature has slashed millions of dollars in freeway funding to balance the state budget.

"The transportation projects supported by economic-recovery funds will benefit every Arizonan," Gov. Jan Brewer said.

"The creation of jobs is vital to our economy and so are stronger connections between communities and our neighboring states."

The state Transportation Board recently decided that 41 shovel-ready highway projects across Arizona can move forward with federal stimulus money, and of the five Maricopa County projects, four are in the West Valley and one is in the north Valley.

The board narrowed a list of more than 100 ready-to-go projects statewide. They are designed to put Arizonans back to work, while bolstering the state highway system.

The 41 selected projects are expected to create 13,000 jobs statewide. The five Maricopa County projects that will receive initial stimulus funding will bring 2,180 jobs to the Valley.

The projects are prepared to go out for bid, and the Arizona Department of Transportation expects construction to begin this summer, spokeswoman Laura Douglas said.

Top priorities

The stimulus money is especially good news for two roads that had funding swept by the Legislature. They are now eligible for stimulus money.

The No. 1 priority on the Maricopa Association of Governments' projects list is Interstate 10 between Sarival Avenue and Verrado Way. That stretch of freeway was accelerated by four years in 2006.

The Legislature swept \$43.2 million from the project.

Goodyear Mayor Jim Cavanaugh said the I-10 expansion from Sarival Avenue to Verrado Way should have been funded in October, and the money should never have been swept by the state Legislature.

The project is crucial to the West Valley,

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where I-10 is being widened now from Loop 101 to Sarival Avenue.

"We're going to have five lanes in each direction all the way to Sarival, and you don't want to narrow from five lanes to two," Cavanaugh said.

"So we need that extra lane, and we need it as soon as we can get it."

According to Cavanaugh, I-10 in Goodyear had the highest fatality rate of any other I-10 stretch nationwide.

Goodyear, Avondale and Litchfield Park joined together to pitch in money to accelerate the I-10 project.

"That's one of the reasons why we accelerated it four years," he said. "It isn't just congestion that's horrible; it's also safety."

The second MAG priority is building one general-purpose lane in each direction on Interstate 17 between Arizona 74, called the Carefree Highway, and Anthem Way.

The Legislature swept \$30.5 million from this project, which is listed as a \$65.7 million project.

It is uncertain now whether any grant money can be used to pay for those projects, but

Douglas said ADOT will pursue the money once the rules that govern those funds are known.

The other projects in the West Valley, in order of priority, are:

- U.S. 60/Grand Avenue: One lane in each direction for 10 miles between Loop 303 and 99th Avenue.
- U.S. 60/Grand Avenue: One lane in each direction for 2 ½ miles from 83rd Avenue to 99th Avenue.
- A Loop 101 traffic interchange at Beardsley Road and Union Hills Drive.

West Valley boon

Peoria Mayor Bob Barrett said the stimulus money is especially beneficial to the West Valley, which had a large number of shovel-ready projects, the standard by which projects were eligible.

Of Grand Avenue, he said, "That will really help because you are going right through the heart of our downtown area, which we are trying to revitalize. If you've been on Grand Avenue at that stretch, it's crowded again, still, yet. It narrows right after you go

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through the light at 83rd (Avenue). It impedes flow.

"All these traffic things, like widening I-10, widening I-17, the Beardsley connection and Grand Avenue, I don't think they necessarily improve traffic that much. I think what (construction) does, it keeps us from falling further behind."

Barrett said the work on I-17 is good for the West Valley because so many residents use that road and are caught in traffic jams in rush-hour traffic.

Surprise Mayor Lyn Truitt called the stimulus funding for Grand Avenue "a good-news story." He said the project has been on the waiting list for a long time.

"That's not just good for Surprise, but it's good for El Mirage and Peoria, Youngtown and even Wickenburg," Truitt said. "Those folks utilize Grand Avenue to get downtown or to get to one of the major freeways."

The road widening also boosts the local economy. About 830 potential jobs will be created from the Grand Avenue widening alone.

"One of the things it does is it not only allows you to leave Surprise, but it allows people to come to Surprise," Truitt said. "With as many exciting events as we have and

the new employers that are coming into the city, that's going to be a real asset to have that completed."

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