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1:11 pm | [94°](#)**NEWS****[News](#)**• Type Size: [A](#) [A](#) [A](#)[Print](#)[Email](#)[Most Popular](#)by [Sean Holstede](#) - Apr. 22, 2009 12:00 AM[The Arizona Republic](#)[Buzz up!](#)

The Valley's Regional Public Transportation Authority has started spending millions of dollars in federal stimulus funds on nine of its 14 planned rail and bus projects.

The \$65 million in expected transit-stimulus money is a boost for the economy and for those who rely on buses and trains to get around.

But it pales in comparison with the projected \$1 billion in lost sales-tax revenues that would have funded transit projects statewide. The economic meltdown already has forced planners to put all new bus services on hold.

Regional leaders are grappling with how to salvage the planned expansion of the Valley's transit system, even as they spend stimulus money. The disconnect highlights how the federal government's quick-turnaround stimulus goals are at odds with long-term needs for more mass transit.

President Barack Obama aims to pump billions of dollars quickly into the national economy by steering money toward ready-to-go projects in an effort to create jobs. Most Valley transit projects, particularly light-rail extensions, are still a couple of years from being ready and cost hundreds of millions of dollars, not the tens of millions coming from the stimulus plan.

What's getting done?

The first signs of stimulus-financed construction will surface at a Goodyear park-and-ride lot around July, said Paul Hodgins, an RPTA program manager.

Other early projects in the planning and preparation stage include adding park-and-ride lots Valley-wide, expanding a Tempe bus-operations center, building a Mesa-Chandler rapid bus line and improving bus stops throughout Phoenix, including at Central Station.

Within two months, all the stimulus projects should be in the preparation phase, Hodgins said.

Congressional investigators from the Government Accountability Office have been to Arizona to ensure that stimulus money isn't being misspent. The GAO told Hodgins it was satisfied with the list because the projects were ready to go and are part of Proposition 400. The 2004 voter-approved measure collects a half-cent-per-dollar sales tax to fund transit improvements.

The RPTA has started its work using its own reserves on the promise of reimbursement in the fall and expects the work to finish within a year.

For Metro light rail, stimulus money will pay for shade structures at some park-and-ride lots.

Life-cycle deficit

The longer-term outlook for transit in Maricopa County is grim.

Recent economic projections show that Proposition 400 will raise \$1 billion less than expected for transit over the next 16 years.

It means \$569 million less can be spent on bus improvements and \$438 million less on future light-rail expansion.

In the short term, it means the region can't afford any of the major bus investments voters approved, at least not yet.

RPTA planners have proposed dramatic cuts: no enhanced service for four years and shelving all new rapid bus lines, a cornerstone of the region's strategy to create a unified bus and rail web.

New projects will be deferred, some indefinitely. Projects scheduled late in the plan, such as a proposed light-rail extension to Paradise Valley Mall, may not get done at all, unless voters approve a new tax.

The first wave of stimulus money can be used only for ready-to-go construction projects.

But the RPTA joins the nationwide scramble for competitive grant money, a second round of stimulus money that they hope can be used for operating funds. The first round, allocated based on existing funding formulas, was intended to be quick. The grants focus more on strategic priorities than speed.

In some cases, the government has wide discretion on spending. In other cases, grants come with a complex set of rules, some still being drafted.

Hodgins has targeted five pots of federal money in the second round from which to request funds:

- A \$1.5 billion Department of Transportation competitive program, spent at the discretion of its secretary, Ray LaHood.

- A competitive \$100 million Transportation Department energy program for projects that reduce greenhouse-gas emissions.
- A \$3.2 billion Department of Energy mostly non-competitive program for energy-efficiency projects.
- A competitive \$150 million Department of Homeland Security program for security measures.
- A competitive \$156 million Environmental Protection Agency clean-diesel program.

Competition is hot

Agencies throughout the country are after the same pots of money, and even within Arizona, at least three agencies have their eyes on the Transportation Department grants.

Phoenix Mayor Phil Gordon, for instance, wants \$200 million for the Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport train project, which would shuttle people from the airport to a light-rail station.

Transportation officials are looking past the federal stimulus dollars.

Eric Anderson, transportation director for the Maricopa Association of Governments, told transit advocates the region needs \$1.2 billion over the next 20 years to sustain Proposition 400. He said the area needs \$7 billion to keep pace with transit investments in peer cities.

"I think the voters get it, and I think they would support a new tax solely for transit," Anderson said.

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