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Arizona close to lifting hold on six road projects

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PHOENIX - Arizona may be close to lifting its hold on six highway projects because of a shortfall in federal funding.

Congress on Thursday sent President Bush an \$8 billion rescue package for the federal highway trust fund.

Arizona Department of Transportation spokesman Doug Nintzel says state officials will review the legislation but that the state's hold on the projects likely would end when President Bush signs the bill.

Nintzel says the state remains concerned about the lack of a long-term fix to the federal government's transportation system.

Arizona's \$6.5 billion five-year highway construction program gets 44 percent of its funding from the federal government.

Six Arizona highway projects totaling \$158 million were put on hold pending a fix of a federal funding shortfall, the state Department of Transportation said Monday.

That represents a fine-tuning of initial estimates that had projects totaling \$171 million being put on hold.

The largest affected project by dollars is the \$107 million widening of U.S. 93 near Hoover Dam. That heavily used highway is the main route between Phoenix and Las Vegas.

Other widening projects affected involve State Route 85 north of Gila Bend (\$23.9 million), U.S. 60 between Globe and Superior (\$9.2 million) and U.S. 60 near Wickenburg (\$5.6 million).

Others are the \$8.9 million construction of a new Interstate 17 interchange at McGuireville and the \$4 million landscaping of the interchange of Interstates 10 and 19 near Tucson.

Work on the affected projects was to have started within the next three to six months, ADOT spokesman Doug Nintzel said. "They have not yet gone to the contract stage."



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ADOT officials for a time thought that widening of U.S. 60 in Tempe - a major freeway route within the Phoenix area - and construction of an I-17 interchange north of Phoenix also would be put on hold.

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However, it turns out neither has federal funding "so at this time we're going to keep them moving forward," Nintzel said.

Also Monday, an Arizona Republican congressman who is a frequent critic of "earmarks" - specific appropriations made by Congress for pet projects - said Congress should fix the highway funding shortfall by rescinding transportation earmarks rather than transferring money from the general fund.

"Congress spent more money on earmarks than there was money to pay for them," U.S. Rep. Jeff Flake said in a statement. "Instead of taking money from the general fund for these earmarks, Congress needs to go on a pork diet."

U.S. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters announced the shortfall in the federal highway trust fund on Friday, primarily blaming reduced fuel-tax revenue because of reduced driving by Americans.

She said the trust fund will run out of money this month, requiring delays in payments in states for construction projects.

Top Arizona officials reacted with criticism of federal inaction to solve a problem long in the making.

"As a result of federal mismanagement and funding loss, Arizona will be forced to delay vital highway projects at a time when we are facing crippling congestion and a need for economic stimulation," Gov. Janet Napolitano said.

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