

## Stimulus road-fund projects are stalled

by **Ronald J. Hansen** - Sept. 24, 2009 12:00 AM  
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Officials in Maricopa County have failed so far to obligate nearly all its \$105 million in stimulus money for road projects and will spend millions of that money on consultants to help meet federal deadlines, officials said Wednesday.

In its latest bimonthly report to Congress on the \$787 billion recovery plan, the Government Accountability Office for the first time tracked the progress of stimulus funds for roadwork by local authorities. The money must be obligated by March 2. The GAO has previously examined roadwork by state agencies like the Arizona Department of Transportation, which has generally been under budget and ahead of schedule.

Much of the delay in Maricopa County stems from an unfamiliarity with federal environmental regulations. Consultants brought in to help could top \$15 million, the GAO suggested Wednesday. That would erase some of the savings from contractors who have eagerly sought stimulus work with lower-than-expected bids.

The delay in picking approved projects, which could stretch to March, has also undermined swift job creation for construction workers, who have been especially hard hit by the recession.

Unlike projects headed by ADOT, which identified all its stimulus-funded work by May, most local projects around the state are still awaiting approval because so few were "shovel-ready," the GAO noted.

Of the \$157 million set aside in Arizona for locally selected road projects, two-thirds goes to Maricopa County. The Maricopa Association of Governments received approval for its first project, \$1 million in improvements at a Phoenix intersection, earlier this month, said Eric J. Anderson, transportation director for MAG.

"I think getting ramped up took longer than anyone thought," Anderson said. Consultants from ADOT, who are familiar with the intricacies of federal highway projects, came on in June and were likely to claim more than \$10 million off the top, he said.

"It's not necessarily disappointing, because we expected it," Anderson said of the consulting fees. "I think it came as a bit of a surprise to some of our members."

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