

Tucson Citizen

Pima County might be shortchanged in public road programs

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Published: 12.29.2008

Pima County might be shortchanged if a massive public works program touted by President-elect Barack Obama comes to fruition in the next few months, a top state transportation official said.

After Obama announced his plan to stimulate the economy with a massive infrastructure program, including billions of dollars for road projects nationwide, the state Department of Transportation drew up a \$900 million wish list.

But the preliminary list - composed of projects that could be "shovel ready" in less than four months - is short on southern Arizona projects, said state Transportation Board Chairman Si Schorr, the panel's Pima County representative.

"Pima County's share amounts to less than \$20 million," Schorr said earlier this month during a transportation board meeting in Tucson.

Though a recent revision of the project list brought Pima County's total to \$35 million, Maricopa County, with roughly four times Pima's population, has more than \$400 million worth of work on the list.

Pima County projects include improvements to state Route 85 at the Lukeville Port of Entry, pavement preservation on several roads, safety enhancements on state Route 86 and new signs for Interstate 19.

More than half of Pima County's share - \$18.5 million - would go for a new interchange at Marsh Station Road and Interstate 10. The wish list will likely expand, said State Engineer Floyd Roehrich, Jr.

"We're still in the discovery stage," Roehrich told the board.

Schorr asked transportation department staff to look for ways to add locally funded projects to the list, which planners admit was based on little real information about funding or qualifications.

Transportation Department Director Victor Mendez cautioned against widening the list to include "bridges to nowhere," or major projects that offer little or no real benefit.

Schorr urged against self-imposed restrictions. There are some local projects he has seen as responsible from the Pima Association of Governments that are not on the state list.

Most of the projects, if not all of the projects that I have received, seem to be quite meritorious," he told the board.

The list includes work that would be jointly funded by the federal and local governments, but none that are exclusively locally funded. "Other than joint-funded projects, we're not adding local projects," Roehrich said.

Mendez said securing federal funds for work on the list would free up state funds for projects not on the list.

The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials surveyed state transportation departments earlier this month and identified \$64 billion in projects nationwide that could be under contract within six months.

That list identified 72 projects in Arizona totaling \$1.1 billion.

The U.S. Conference of Mayors, a nonpartisan organization of city leaders, compiled a similar list, which was updated Dec. 19. That list shows 13 ready-to-go transportation projects in Tucson totaling \$351 million.
