

Getting America 'Shovel Ready'

by Ari Natter

As Congress prepares stimulus, transport industry
worries infrastructure boost won't be big enough



skeptical of infrastructure projects could come around. Republican leaders from both chambers met with President-elect Obama Jan. 5 to discuss the stimulus package.

"We welcome the opportunity to be in the discussion," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said. "We would like to participate in the forming of this."

But when asked if he considered transportation infrastructure spending an appropriate part of the stimulus package, McConnell was noncommittal. "We haven't seen the package yet. I'll be happy to respond in detail when we get it," he said.

Stipulations attached to the funding in the package, such as "use it or lose it" requirements, as Obama described them, also have some in the transportation community concerned there might not be enough time to fund meaningful projects.

The proposal distributed by the House T&I Committee for instance, recommended stipulations that 50 percent of the funds be obligated within 90 days of the legislation's enactment. "Within 90 days if the states don't use their funds they lose," committee chairman James L. Oberstar, D-Minn., said Jan. 7.

The rest of the funds must be obligated 180 days after enactment to be used within a year's time, according to the committee's proposal.

The result, some observers fear, could be a gigantic patchwork of small projects.

"I think we are going to see a lot of repavings, a lot of right turn lane additions and just very routine and mundane things," said Robert W. Poole, director of transportation studies at the Reason Foundation. Those projects "are useful to do," he said, "but when people think of infrastructure investment they are really thinking of things that improve productivity and the economy."

The government needs to target places where the system is breaking down, he said, by adding capacity to key Interstate routes and reducing congestion, he said. "But none of that is going to be touched by the stimulus package."

Still, even minor work adds up in the long run, said Bruce Carlton, president of the National Industrial Transportation League.

"A couple of twists in the road and segments of considerable disrepair slows the whole system down," Carlton said. "It's not like building a new segment of Interstate highway, it can have dramatic impact in the local areas and because the system ties together any and every expenditure is helpful."

And John Horsley, whose American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials identified over \$64 billion in "ready-to-go" infrastructure projects called the proposal outlined by the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee "robust."

"If we are talking about somewhere in the range of \$30 billion

Top Ten States "Ready-to-Go" highway projects (in \$ billions)

STATE	# OF PROJECTS	DOLLAR VALUE
1) Utah	136	\$10.8
2) Florida	92	\$6.9
3) Texas	853	\$6.0
4) North Carolina	296	\$5.1
5) California	N/A	\$5.0
6) Ohio	N/A	\$2.1
7) Georgia	319	\$1.9
8) Michigan	208	\$1.7
9) New Jersey	153	\$1.6
10) Washington	60	\$1.3

Source: AASHTO

for highways, that would be a major increase in investment," he said.

"Just because the pie itself has grown doesn't mean our slice of the pie has grown proportionally," said Jim Berard, a spokesman for the House T&I Committee. "We are not too concerned that infrastructure is no longer half the stimulus package."

Many state departments of transportation plan on putting that money to good use.

In Utah, the state department of transportation identified nearly \$11 billion in "shovel ready" projects, successfully completing several environmental review procedures right before being asked to name projects that could move quickly.

"It was kind of a quirk in timing," said Nile Easton, a spokesman for the Utah Department of Transportation. "We were ready to go."

Among the projects identified is the \$3 billion Mountain View Corridor, a 24-mile long alternative to the heavily congested I-15 and \$1 billion widening of U.S. Highway 6 from two lanes to at least four lanes over a 120-mile section of mountainous terrain.

"This would alleviate congestion and be very vital to trucking," said David Creer, executive director of the Utah Trucking Association. "It's a bottleneck for the country."

The Waterways Council hopes part of the \$7 billion proposed for the Coast Guard will be used to speed work on lock and dam construction on the Lower Monongahela River near Pittsburgh.

The area is a bottleneck for barges towing loads of coal, building products, petrochemicals and other commodities, which have to be broken up in order to navigate the current 600-foot locks and dams.

"If we continue to operate under the same old-same old fashion we have been and don't provide money in the stimulus, it will be completed sometime in the 2020s," said John Doyle, vice president of government relations for the Waterways Council.

And the short line railroad industry says stimulus money could be used for rail tie replacement that could allow for increased train speeds.

Still, it remains to be seen whether the final version of the stimulus package will actually prove to be the largest since Eisenhower's establishment of the Interstate Highway System. That project, which at the time cost about \$115 billion, equals about \$800 billion in today's dollars.

But with a highway bill due this year, others are holding on to hope that a second round could be coming.

"You don't just do that something like that spur of the moment," said Berard, the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee spokesman. "It is something that will require a lot more discussion and debate further down the line." ■