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Valley road work planned from stimulus

By Mark Flatten
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Traffic crosses railroad tracks at the intersection of Power and Pecos roads in Gilbert. Feb. 10, 2009.

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If all goes well, the East Valley is about to become a ripped-up maze of asphalt and concrete as cities begin a wild construction spree aimed at improving infrastructure and creating jobs - a blitz that will be paid for through the federal stimulus plan that is on the brink of becoming law.

Stimulus package splits ASU economists [<http://www.eastvalleytribune.com/story/135282>]

Almost \$900 million worth of projects to upgrade roads, water and sewer systems and other public facilities have been included on the wish lists of East Valley cities seeking federal funds through the stimulus plan.

Metro, the agency that operates the Valley's light-rail system, is asking for another \$1.2 billion. Included in Metro's request is \$290 million to extend the light-rail system 3.5 miles through downtown Mesa to Horne Avenue. That project is still in the planning stages, and has yet to go to the Mesa City Council for approval. But it was included in Metro's list of potential stimulus projects as a "placeholder" in case the federal money becomes available, and the project ultimately meets the requirements, said Wulf Grote, the agency's director of project development.

The projects on the lists are not guaranteed funding. Rather they are the planned infrastructure improvements that are far enough along in the planning process that they can begin quickly, thereby meeting the goals of creating jobs and boosting the nation's sluggish economy.

At this point, no one can say for sure what projects will be funded, or even what criteria will be used to determine which should take priority, according to representatives of local governments seeking stimulus money.

The Senate approved its \$838 billion version of plan Tuesday. But that bill must be reconciled with the House version, which has a slightly lower price tag, that was passed last month. Differences will be worked

out in a conference committee, and both chambers of Congress must pass an identical version that would be forwarded to the president for his signature.

Among the differences in the two versions is when a job is considered ready for funding, according to Nathan Pryor, senior policy planner for the Maricopa Association of Governments.

The House version calls for half of the federal stimulus money for local transportation projects to be designated within 75 days of the bill becoming law, he said. The Senate version allows the money to be obligated to local jobs within a year.

The more time there is for allocating money, the more projects might qualify for the federal funds, he said.

What that means is that some projects that are on the lists would only qualify if something closer to the Senate version of the bill is what is ultimately passed, said Scott Butler, a lobbyist for Mesa.

Mesa included all of the construction projects it has planned that may be eligible on its list. Like other Valley cities, Mesa is coordinating its request for road funding through MAG, the area's regional planning authority on transportation issues. When the federal money does start flowing, transportation funds will be dispersed to local governments through MAG. Other types of projects, such as water and sewer improvements, will be funneled through state funds and agencies using mechanisms that are already in place for doling out federal dollars.

Of the \$339.2 million in projects on Mesa's list, only about \$46 million worth are far enough along in the planning stages that construction could begin within 30 to 120 days, according to MAG. The bulk of the spending - \$289.4 million - is in projects that could not be under construction for at least six months.

Most of the money being sought by cities is for road construction, and improvements to water and sewer systems. Mesa is also seeking more than \$46 million for improvements to Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport, work that can begin within 120 days.

The projects that likely will receive the highest priority are the ones that are deemed "shovel ready," meaning they have been planned and have the necessary permits and environmental studies completed.

When the sudden surge of federal money does begin to flow, that does not mean every road and intersection in the East Valley will become a ripped-up construction zone, Butler said. The process of filtering the money through the state and regional planning agencies will take some time and the work will be scattered throughout the cities, he said.

"I would be surprised if people saw such a massive scale of local street construction that it would be an out-and-out disruption from one street to another," Butler said. "Once this money actually filters down and is dispersed, you will see some quality projects in the different communities. But I think folks would be overestimating the scale of the actual infrastructure side if they envision that it would cause major disruptions throughout the city. I wish that were the case."

The biggest single item on the wish list for the East Valley compiled by MAG is the \$290 million request from Metro to extend the light-rail line through Mesa. Grote, the project development director for Metro, said the agency is still studying ways to expand transit through the city. The ultimate decision might be to extend the light-rail line, or it might be to add bus routes that will feed into the existing line that ends near Main Street and Dobson Road.

Once that decision is made it would have to be approved by the Mesa City Council. An environmental assessment of the final plan would also have to be conducted before the project could be submitted for federal funding under the stimulus plan, Grote said.

That whole process could take two years, Grote said.

If the final version of the bill allows for later deadlines, there is a chance the project could qualify for stimulus money, Grote said.

One project on Chandler's wish list is a transit center for the southern party of the city, said Mike Normand, city transportation services and planning manager.

Chandler is conducting a site search for the transit center, which is needed as the city expands its bus routes. Last July the route along Dobson Road was extended. The city is looking to extend routes south along Alma School Road, Arizona Avenue and possibly Price Road in the future, Normand said.

The transit center would provide an ending point.

Once the site is selected, the center could be designed and ready to construct in about a year, Normand said.

The time factor will play out significantly in deciding which projects get funded by the federal stimulus package, said Patrice Kraus, intergovernmental affairs coordinator for Chandler.


"We are looking internally at the projects we can get ready within the time frames established by the federal stimulus package," Kraus said. "The transit projects seem to be very strong projects so we're hopeful they'll be in consideration."

Queen Creek Town Manager John Kross said last week the town wasn't expecting to get any stimulus money.

"I don't know really what to expect at this point," Kross said Tuesday. "I don't think my comments have changed until we see the bill."

Queen Creek originally submitted about \$84 million in projects. A revised list issued by MAG Tuesday whittled that down to four road projects.



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