

Lining up for a share of stimulus aid

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1/9/09

Christmas has come and gone, but the City of Providence is still hoping for a lot of presents in the new year – 18 miles of new sidewalks, 1,600 trees, a new streetcar system and even an upgrade to the Roger Williams Park Zoo's polar bear exhibit.

Those are among the hundreds of items that officials in Providence and across the state hope could be paid for from an influx of dollars expected from the massive economic stimulus package that President-elect Barack H. Obama and congressional leaders want to pass by early next month.

The R.I. Department of Transportation has prepared a list of roughly \$145 million worth of projects that could be started within six months of the stimulus bill's passage – far more than the \$96 million the state is currently planning to spend on transportation projects this year.

Wish lists are also circulating in cities and towns, though no one's quite sure yet how projects will be prioritized, how much the Ocean State will get or how the money will be dispersed.

"There [are] a lot of hypotheticals out there, but ... we're trying to be as ready as we can," said DOT spokesman Charles St. Martin.

The DOT list includes \$50 million in road-resurfacing work and nearly \$31.5 million to fix and replace bridges, including \$15 million to complete the Washington Bridge that connects Interstate 195 Eastbound between Providence and East Providence.

The City of Providence has plans to spend up to \$584.9 million on dozens of projects, ranging from the rehabilitation of the downtown Amtrak station to acquiring 60,000 single-stream recycling containers.

Gov. Donald L. Carcieri recently asked the leaders of the R.I. Economic Development Corporation (EDC) and the R.I. Division of Planning to work with municipal officials to identify and prioritize projects, and the DOT also has reached out to them, a spokeswoman said.

"It's moving so quickly – right now it's a blur," said Dan Beardsley, executive director of the Rhode Island League of Cities and Towns.

Carcieri last week said the state might get "upwards of \$125 million" from the stimulus package for spending not tied to transportation projects. He also said he'd like the state to hold on to any new federal money not earmarked, to "guard against worsening [economic] conditions."

The president-elect and other top Democrats have said they want to pass the stimulus bill, dubbed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, by Feb. 16. The final package – which Obama's advisers say will focus on infrastructure and energy projects, tax cuts, and aid to state governments – is expected to cost nearly \$800 billion over two years. Some economists have suggested spending \$1 trillion or more.

Rhode Island would certainly seem to be fertile ground for major infrastructure investments. The state has 164 structurally deficient bridges, 61 of which have vehicle-weight restrictions, and 26 percent of the state's pavement is in poor or failed condition, according to the final report released last month by the Governor's Blue Ribbon Panel on Transportation Funding. ([READ MORE](#))

To put the state's transportation system in good repair, the panel estimated that the DOT would need to spend about \$285 million more than its current budget every year for the next decade, with additional dollars needed to stabilize the R.I. Public Transit Authority, the panel found.

Gilbert Brunnhoeffler, president of the Rhode Island arm of the American Society of Civil Engineers, said his group wants to see the nation make an investment in its infrastructure comparable to what was spent on the interstate highway system in the 1950s. In 2005, the society noted, Rhode Island had the worst bridges in the country.

John C. Simmons, executive director of the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council (RIPEC), estimates that "if the infrastructure money comes as we envision it, the state may be in line for several hundreds of millions of dollars." The state needs to set priorities about how the money is to be spent in order to make sure it stimulates the economy and creates long-term benefits, he said.

Beardsley said the League of Cities and Towns was beginning to consult with local leaders about their priorities. "I know people are putting wish lists together," he said. "I think that's the only way to describe it – they're throwing everything in and the kitchen sink, and hoping something comes back and sticks to the wall."

An early indication of what communities are considering came from Providence, Warwick and Woonsocket, when the three cities contributed to a list of 15,221 "ready-to-go" projects across the country that was compiled by the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

In an interview, Providence Mayor David N. Cicilline said all the projects he listed could be ready to begin within 90 days of the money becoming available, and most likely would be completed by the end of 2010. The mayor's requests include \$200 million for school renovations, \$30 million for a new public works facility and \$10 million to repair 18 miles of sidewalks.

Cicilline traveled to Washington, D.C., last month for a series of meetings with congressional leaders, during which the mayors emphasized that the money they are looking for would fund new projects, as opposed to covering operating budgets as state governors have requested.

Warwick Mayor Scott Avedisian – who asked for \$50 million, mostly for water-system upgrades – said that in some cases, the projects are ones for which voters already have approved bond money, but the borrowing had been put on hold because of the credit crunch.

"We could move in 30 days," he said.

Other projects are more ambitious. Cicilline requested \$20 million to begin construction of a citywide streetcar system, similar to those in Portland, Ore., and Salt Lake City, and there are discussions about extending any new transit line into Cranston and Warwick as well. Avedisian said that could be "a real demonstration project to show that not only can this help economically, but it can really change the face of Rhode Island."

Across the border in Massachusetts, Gov. Deval L. Patrick has said the commonwealth has \$4.7 billion in capital projects that can begin within six months. Local items on the list include new courthouses, improvements to the New Bedford waterfront and renovations at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth. Patrick has organized seven task forces made up of state and local officials to help set priorities.

Apart from infrastructure, another major portion of the federal package is expected to be increased funding for Medicaid, the federal-state health insurance program for the poor. With a \$1.7 billion budget, Rhode Island's Medicaid program, RItE Care, has become a major drain on state finances, and the number of people using RItE Care is likely to increase further as the recession continues.

Linda Katz, policy director of The Poverty Institute located at Rhode Island College, said the federal government probably would increase the share of the Medicaid budget that it pays for, with the potential to save the state hundreds of millions of dollars over the next year or two.

Amy Kempe, the governor's spokeswoman, said the recent agreement between the state and the federal government to cap Medicaid spending – known as the Global Medicaid Waiver – includes a provision that would allow Rhode Island to receive any extra funding provided in a stimulus bill. •