

March 19, 2009

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Stimulus to help Sacramento-area transportation projects

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In Placerville, they're angling for funds to widen historic Highway 49's thin shoulders. Woodland wants new lamps on Main Street. And transit agencies throughout the region are putting in for money to buy dozens of buses.

Those are some of the Sacramento area projects expected to be approved today as part of a \$118 million-plus spending plan aimed at turning new federal economic stimulus dollars into quick work on the street.

The biggest pitch comes from downtown Sacramento, where city officials are asking for \$20 million to move passenger and freight rail tracks a few hundred feet north in the downtown railyard.

The track realignment would open the largely vacant 240-acre railyard to redevelopment – allowing streets to be built into the landlocked site and kick-starting construction of a transit center.

It's billed as the biggest urban infill project in the nation, and it could double the size of downtown over time.

"Everything hinges on the track relocation," city official Fran Halbakken said.

It may be the biggest gamble on the region's federal fund wish list. Sacramento officials say they hope to launch track work before a federal deadline date later this year, but they acknowledge there are several hurdles to jump first.

The Sacramento Area Council of Governments – composed of regional city and county officials – is expected today to nominate the track project and some 40 other projects for federal funds.

They estimate the projects and others already listed could create several thousand jobs around Sacramento this year, most of them construction and maintenance work.

The money comes from the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, approved last month by Congress and signed by the president to boost faltering local economies by creating jobs.

Sacramento officials say they loaded their wish list with projects they believe they can start this summer.

That includes \$32 million in smaller road rehabilitation projects SACOG divvied up last month among cities and counties in the region.

Road rehabilitation – typically pavement overlays or full reconstruction – puts many smaller contractors on the job quickly, planners said.

"You get bang for your buck," said Olin Woods, manager of capital programs for SACOG. He estimated small road rehab projects create 10 percent more jobs than larger expansion projects.

Today's SACOG board discussion and decision will mark the end of the first frenetic stage of the federal process.

Local officials said they next will work with state and federal representatives to win application approvals for projects this spring and summer.

The project list represents a balance, SACOG's Rebecca Sloan said, between creating jobs and providing transportation improvements.

"We tried to spread the money around," Woods said, "so all counties felt like they are treated fairly."

Projects up for approval today include sidewalks on Greenback Lane, an upgrade of Elk Grove Boulevard at Highway 99, up to 1,000 bicycle racks requested by air quality officials, and a rail line in West Sacramento between the port and a local cement plant.

By far, the biggest project on the list is the \$20 million request for track realignment funds for Sacramento's downtown railyard.

To launch that project in a timely fashion, officials say they must come up with another \$40 million to cover the full \$60 million track-move price tag, and obtain federal environmental approvals.

The city and a private developer have cobbled together some funds but are waiting for the state to deliver \$20 million in promised infrastructure bond funds that have been held up by the state's ongoing budget crisis.

State Treasurer Bill Lockyer said he intends to go to the bond markets late this month to raise \$4 billion for projects statewide, and local officials say they believe the railyard project could be among the first projects to get that state bond funding.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger expressed personal interest last year in seeing the city move forward on railyard development.

"For too long, I've been driving by this area and wondering: 'When are they going to develop it? It looks ugly,' " Schwarzenegger said in heralding the since-delayed state bond funds.

SACOG officials have compiled a list of backup projects in case the rail realignment or other projects fail to meet the federal "shovel ready" deadlines.

Those include a bridge in Rancho Cordova over the Folsom South Canal, traffic signals in Marysville and a new bus maintenance facility for Regional Transit.

"We do not want to lose a nickel of this stimulus money," Woods said.

Also up for discussion today is nearly \$38 billion for transit agencies. SACOG officials have listed 22 projects, many involving maintenance work on tracks, buses and trains. Transit agencies also are requesting federal funds for new buses, an expenditure that does not specifically create jobs but is allowed under federal program rules, transit officials said.

Another several million dollars in federal stimulus funds are expected to be spent on state highways around the Sacramento region through a separate state-run program.

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