

States' highway projects wish list has \$64B tag

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More than 5,000 highway projects are ready to go, state transportation officials say, if Congress will only pony up \$64.3 billion as part of an economic aid plan.

The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, which compiled the list, said the projects would provide jobs and help reduce a backlog of crumbling roads and bridges.

The group wants Congress to include the projects in an economic recovery bill that could total as much as \$500 billion. The spending is a priority for President-elect Barack Obama and Democratic congressional leaders, who say they hope to have it ready for the new president to sign when he takes office Jan. 20.

"If we're given resources through the economic recovery bill that allows states to proceed with jump-start investment like we're talking about, we'll be able to put up to 1.8 million Americans back to work," John Horsley, the association's executive director, said Friday.

Obama said in his weekly radio address Saturday that he wants to create the largest public works project since the building of the federal highway system in the 1950s — a program focused on repairing roads and schools. The outlines of the plan come a day after the Labor Department announced that employers cut 533,000 jobs in November, the most in 34 years.

Governors made a round of calls on Capitol Hill recently with the message that there are \$136 billion in infrastructure projects ready for inclusion in an aid bill, including school repairs and water and sewer projections in addition to transportation.

The Federal Highway Administration estimates that approximately 35,000 jobs are supported by every \$1.25 billion spent on transportation projects.

Supporters of such public works spending say it is a surer way to create jobs than, for example, the \$600 to \$1,200 tax rebate checks sent out to individuals and couples this year, and can provide lasting economic benefits.

Skeptics say infrastructure spending is relatively slow-acting and its effects will not be fully felt until the economy is already on the rebound.

The projects are mostly repairs and upgrades to existing roads and bridges considered "ready to go" because they could be under contract within 180 days, Horsley said.

"It's the type of stuff that you can get out the door quickly," he said.

The state with the highest dollar list of projects was Utah at \$10.8 billion, followed by Florida, almost \$7 billion; Texas, \$6 billion; North Carolina, \$5.2 billion, and California, \$5 billion. The District of Columbia, \$56 million, and Vermont, \$78.4 million, had the least expensive projects lists.

Texas had the longest list of projects, 853. Washington, D.C., and Alaska had the fewest, three and four, respectively.

Horsley said he expects a group that represents transit agencies to propose about \$32 billion in subway, light rail and bus projects for the stimulus bill.

The Airports Council International says there are about \$1 billion in runway and other airport improvements that are ready to go, and the States for Passenger Rail Coalition has a list of \$1.4 billion in track upgrades and rail station improvements.

The recession has meant big reductions in tax revenues, and 43 of the 50 states are running budget deficits. Since virtually every state has to live under a balanced budget, governors have begun cutting services, laying off workers and considering tax increases.