

## (January 26, 2009) Daily Herald - Illinois eager to claim Obama money for infrastructure

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Projects, we've got projects.

Along with the 49 other states, Illinois has its share of old buses and train cars, roads exploding with potholes and dilapidated bridges.

Couple that with the rising jobless rates and there's little doubt the wheels of Congress will spin faster than usual to approve some version of an economic stimulus package.

But the \$825 billion question for Illinoisans blessed with a home-state president and cursed with a meltdown in Springfield is what will the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act bring us?

On Jan. 8, President Obama called for an economic stimulus plan that would fix roads and infrastructure, support green technology, equip schools, expand broadband - and create jobs.

Now, Congress is dissecting the various stimulus plans in the works.

The House Appropriations Committee's proposed American Recovery and Reinvestment Act calls for \$825 billion in spending - with \$275 billion going to tax cuts.

Already Republican congressmen such as Highland Park's Mark Kirk are critical it won't generate enough jobs, and Democrats like Daniel Lipinski want more money for transportation and infrastructure.

"I'm very disappointed," said Lipinski, a Western Springs Democrat on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. "There is a need to put people back to work and there are lots of projects that are ready, but much more needs to be put into the bill."

Assuming a bill is enacted, Illinois lawmakers worry the corruption arrest of Gov. Rod Blagojevich will hamstring the state.

"Clearly this is one of the areas where the governor's legal situation becomes a liability," said Rep. Peter Roskam, a Wheaton Republican on the House Ways and Means Committee. "Other big states are well-organized and have got their acts together."

A moving target

The Appropriations Committee plan includes money for energy-efficiency programs, education, health care, job programs and state Medicaid payments.

The numbers keep changing and rival committees such as Transportation are pushing to give millions more for infrastructure. As of last week, the Appropriations bill included \$30 billion for highway construction, \$31 billion to modernize public infrastructure, \$3 billion for airport improvements, and \$10 billion for public transit and rail.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning estimates \$2.2 billion could flow to Illinois, based on recent numbers.

The government is looking for "shovel-ready" projects that could be bid within weeks or months.

This means items early in the planning process such as the Elgin-O'Hare Expressway or the STAR commuter line likely won't benefit.

But organizations like Metra, Pace and the Chicago Transit Authority have a lineup of short-term needs.

"We have a number of projects that would fit into any category and some I believe we could get under contract in 60 to 90 days," Metra Executive Director Phil Pagano said, citing bridge repairs on the Union Pacific line as an example.

Transit agencies aren't the only ones with budget holes to fill. Chicago is engaged in an expensive modernization of O'Hare International Airport and money's so tight for the Illinois Department of Transportation it reduced salting this year.

County governments also want to get in on the act.

Cook County identified about \$581 million in transportation, water and sewer, public works, public safety and environmental needs.

DuPage County has \$38 million of shovel-ready ideas ranging from computer upgrades to new HVAC systems to green roofs.

McHenry County has a \$49 million wish list that include basics such as road resurfacing and rebuilding work.

Kane County is seeking \$232 million with one of its big ticket items being the \$160 million Stearns Road Bridge Corridor near Wayne, which is awaiting state dollars.

And, Lake County is ready with \$193 million in projects that include state roads.

"These are not pork projects, these are roads that under any evaluation need to be widened," County Administrator Barry Burton said. "The backlog in the county is critical."

So with local competition as well as national competition, what projects get picked?

"At the end of the day, all we may get is a stoplight," Burton said, jokingly.

Urban planners such as the Metropolitan Planning Council President MarySue Barrett are lobbying to direct the dollars to existing infrastructure that needs fixing. That means viaduct and bridge repairs, road resurfacing, eliminating slow zones for trains and replacing worn-out buses.

"It may not be all that exciting, but it's so overdue," Barrett said.

"We want smart investments that jump-start the economy and build healthier neighborhoods."

Meanwhile, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning is pushing to get the lion's share for northeastern Illinois.

Agency Executive Director Randy Blankenhorn contends that 75 percent of the state's economic activity occurs in Cook and the collar counties but he fears it could be short-shrifted. Some recommendations are circulating that would leave the region with just 33 percent of the pie, Blankenhorn said.

"That's not even a starting point for discussion, that's not a proportionate share," he stressed.

Political realities

In Washington, the rhetoric is heating up as congressional leaders and the new president work to reconcile competing interests. With billions of dollars being thrown around the stakes couldn't be higher.

"There's a significant amount of tax dollars being committed in a tight time frame," said Rep. Melissa Bean, a Barrington Democrat.

Those tight time frames irk Kirk, who contends that the speed with which the government will need to move is unprecedented.

Still, tax cuts in the legislation are expected to draw sufficient GOP members into the fold. The policy also precludes earmarks, the practice of tucking pet projects into laws without notice.

Roskam faulted Democratic leaders for crafting a plan that's long on spending, short on tax cuts and "piling on" Obama's original draft.

"How much is for shovel-ready (projects) and how much is for dressed-up increased federal spending at the department of agriculture?" Roskam asked.

But the dire unemployment numbers and the fact it's estimated between 28,000 to 34,700 jobs are created for every \$1 billion invested, momentum is snowballing to pass some sort of stimulus package.

"If the purpose is to get people back to work there's no better place than transportation infrastructure," Lipinski said.

"It's clear Congress needs to act," said Roskam, a fiscal conservative who opposed the 2008 bailout bill for banks and financial institutions.

Once the dollars start flowing to states, there's a new tangle for Illinois leaders.

Kirk and U.S. Rep. Bill Foster, a Geneva Democrat, attached an amendment to the stimulus proposal that blocks Blagojevich from having any power over federal revenues, putting the funds in the hands of the General Assembly until he is out of office.

Many lawmakers were optimistic the governor would be out of a job before the money is distributed. The U.S. House could vote on the package as early as Wednesday while the governor's impeachment trial in the state Senate starts Monday.

"There's a sense of urgency in Springfield," Bean said, adding that even if the money comes through before the impeachment soap opera ends, it won't be a "high priority" for Blagojevich, who has denied any wrongdoing.

Adding to the mix, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning is vying for the authority to distribute the funds. Blankenhorn contends the agency, which coordinates land use and transportation planning for Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry and Will counties, is best qualified to dispassionately determine the region's needs.

Unlike previous transportation or infrastructure funding laws, the economic stimulus proposal is not tied to matching state funds.

That's a double-edged sword, experts say.

Illinois has been without a capital bill for years and many had hoped this would be the year for the legislature to act.

But given the general chaos in Springfield, transportation insiders speculated that if the stimulus package goes through, state lawmakers will use it to postpone doing anything.