



February 18, 2009

Lawmakers consider spending priorities

\$421 million could go for roads and bridges

By Marcus Green and Tom Loftus
The Courier-Journal

FRANKFORT, Ky. -- Key officials are meeting this week to determine how to spend as much as \$421 million in economic-stimulus funds to build and repair roads and bridges throughout the state.

The group, which includes House and Senate leaders and officials in Gov. Steve Beshear's administration, is compiling lists of priorities submitted by all legislators and working with Transportation Cabinet officials to see which projects qualify for the stimulus money.

"It's so preliminary that I don't have any detail to offer," Transportation Secretary Joe Prather said yesterday. He added, however, that he expects projects across Kentucky to be funded.

Though the state is still awaiting word from the Federal Highway Administration on exactly how much money Kentucky will receive, officials have estimated that \$421 million will be available for road projects.

The federal government has three weeks to award stimulus funds to Kentucky, according to the Transportation Cabinet. Within four months after that -- by around July 10 -- half of the state's stimulus money must be committed.

"We want to make sure that those projects that can be let in 120 days are ready. ..." said Sen. Ernie Harris, R-Crestwood and chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee, adding that "the pot of money available is not as big as the number of projects out there."

Statewide, officials have said, 100 projects totaling \$800 million are ready to begin construction.

"So we'll be prioritizing the projects," Harris said.

House Speaker Greg Stumbo and Senate President David Williams were not immediately available for comment yesterday.

But several participants in this week's talks said the goal is to reach agreement in both chambers -- and within Beshear's administration -- on a revised two-year road plan, including the stimulus money for specific projects.

"Just like the budget and tax bills, we're working with the executive branch because I think when we're finished, we want to be able to stand up and say, 'These are Kentucky's priorities,'" said Rep. Rick Rand, D-Bedford and chairman of the House budget committee.

Proponents of The Ohio River Bridges Project -- the \$4.1 billion plan to add two river crossings and redesign the Spaghetti Junction interchange in Louisville -- are pushing for a share of the state's stimulus funds to accelerate construction.

"We don't think there's another project in Kentucky or Indiana that provides the kind of economic stimulus now and for the future, compared with the bridges project," said Kay Stewart, executive

director of the Build the Bridges Coalition.

But Prather said yesterday that it was unlikely that the bridges project would qualify.

"There's nothing there that can be shovel-ready in the allotted time, so that remains another issue for another day," he said.

The stimulus money will provide a badly needed jolt of funds to the state road-construction program.

During 2007, as then-Gov. Ernie Fletcher was running for re-election, the state awarded a record amount of nearly \$1.4 billion in road and bridge construction contracts. But that left the cabinet depleted, and road fund revenues have plunged because of the economic recession.

Last year, Beshear's cabinet was able to award less than \$500 million on such contracts.

Besides the new stimulus funds, lawmakers are considering a road-bond issue to bolster state road construction.

Last year, lawmakers approved a six-year road plan on the final day of the legislative session, and Beshear vetoed it.

Williams, R-Burkesville, filed a lawsuit challenging Beshear's power to write the road plan, but Franklin Circuit Court ruled in Beshear's favor.

But the bipartisan mood of cooperation that helped achieve passage last week of tax increases on cigarettes and package sales of alcohol seems to be prevailing as the two branches work out how to spend stimulus highway funds.

"The Transportation Cabinet has been involved in our meetings," said House Majority floor Leader Rocky Adkins, D-Sandy Hook. "We are including them in our meetings, and we're trying our best and working closely together to see if an agreement can be reached."

Reporter Marcus Green can be reached at (502) 582-4675.

Reporter Tom Loftus can be reached at (502) 875-5136.
