

Interstate project will receive about 18% of state's federal funds for roads

By Tom Held of the Journal Sentinel

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The first infusion of federal transportation stimulus dollars will put hundreds of state road builders to work in May and June and advance the timeline on some major projects by a year or two.

About 18% of the allocation for road work from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act will be spent on the reconstruction of I-94 south of Milwaukee, with an expansion of the freeway west of Madison also in line for a significant federal boost.

Contracts for the stimulus-funded projects in the state will be awarded in April, May and June. Bulldozers, dump trucks and other heavy equipment should start rolling onto work sites about 30 to 45 days after each award, based on a release of federal dollars announced Tuesday.

The infrastructure work around the state represents a mix of bridge reconstruction, highway expansion, roadway resurfacing and pavement replacement, all projects already in the plans of state and local transportation departments. The infusion of federal cash moves those projects from wish list to shovel-ready.

"I've talked to different groups in different parts of the state who think a lot of this would not have happened," said Craig Thompson, executive director of the Transportation Development Association. "Would it be happening right now? The answer is primarily no."

Tom Fisher, president and business manager of the Wisconsin Laborer's District Council, said that without the boost provided by the stimulus money, hundreds of his members would collect unemployment instead of paychecks this summer.

He put unemployment among construction workers tied to the road building at more than 15%, double the statewide figure among all job categories.

"The sooner we can get people back to work, the sooner we can get our economy back on track," Fisher said.

"If they're sitting home, they're not buying cars, and they're not paying taxes."

In other parts of the country, road projects funded through the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act will start within the month, according to the White House. Federal authorities released a \$28 billion installment to states and local transportation officials to put into their local road and bridge work.

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Jobs saved, created

Wisconsin's share will be \$529 million, said Gov. Jim Doyle. The work won't start until the usual spring opening of the construction season. By Doyle's estimate, the infusion of federal cash will create or save about 13,000 jobs in Wisconsin.

Some of the \$529 million won't be awarded until spring 2010. About \$158 million of the total will be disbursed to cities and counties for local road and bridge work to be done a year from now.

In addition, the state plans to seek a portion of the \$8 billion in stimulus funds earmarked for high-speed rail projects.

Projects in the first round, accounting for \$300 million of the highway and bridges total, were listed in a state budget bill signed by the governor last month.

The big-ticket items on the state's stimulus shopping list include the expansion of I-94 from the Badger Interchange in Dane County to Highway N. The freeway will be widened from four lanes to six, at a cost of \$40 million.

Work on the reconstruction and expansion of I-94 in Milwaukee, Racine and Kenosha counties will total \$97.6 million, an initial investment in the project expected to cost \$1.9 billion through its completion in 2016.

The smallest project on the list, in dollars, entails preventive maintenance on Highway 8 from St. Croix Falls to Turtle Lake. That's a mere \$83,481 of the \$300 million total.

On projects big and small, the companies and laborers that build roads in Wisconsin are eager to get to work and reverse the downward trend in jobs and investment that started to hit hard late last year.

"We noticed the work hours drop off dramatically in the fall," Fisher said.

Terry McGowan, manager of the International Operating Engineers Local 139, said he expects to put 1,000 workers on jobs driving bulldozers, cranes and other machinery once the stimulus-funded projects get started.

McGowan described the recovery act work as a shot of adrenaline for the industry, but said the boost will be short-lived without a solution to the long-term financial crisis in transportation financing.

Gas tax revenue, the main source of funding for state highway projects, dropped off \$27.6 million from 2007 to 2008, according to figures from the state Department of Revenue.

That decrease has prompted a renewed discussion of toll roads in Wisconsin and fueled the search for additional sources of money to build roads and other transportation infrastructure.

"After the funding is gone this year, we're going to have to work together as a state to keep our infrastructure moving forward," McGowan said.