

## NEXT STIMULUS PLAN

### State and local projects line up for federal funds

By Paul Hammel

WORLD-HERALD BUREAU

LINCOLN — State and local officials are scrambling for what they hope will be a gusher of federal road-building and publicworks money when President-elect Barack Obama takes office next month.

The details and dollar amount of the proposal are far from worked out, but an economic stimulus plan is expected to be approved by Congress.

The measure would funnel tens of millions of dollars to Nebraska and Iowa for projects to rebuild Interstate 80, replace rotting county bridges and upgrade aging sewer and water systems.

One thing is clear — only projects “ready to go” would get the stimulus money, which is designed to boost the economy by creating jobs for road-building crews, engineers and others.

“We’re getting ready, as all states are. And the cities and counties need to get their projects ready as well,” said Steve Maraman, financial controller for the Nebraska Department of Roads.

The Roads Department recently compiled a list of \$250 million in state projects that could be started within 180 days, Maraman said.

That amount compares with the department’s current construction budget of \$317 million, about \$117 million of which is for highway and Interstate improvements.

The agency was sending a letter Thursday to cities and counties to obtain similar lists from them.

The Iowa Department of Transportation says the state has \$221 million in highway projects that could be started soon. Iowa also has identified \$79.6 million in trail projects, \$65 million in rail projects and \$36 million in public transit projects.

Officials of the Nebraska Association of County Officials and the League of Nebraska Municipalities are alerting their members to have their ducks in a row so they can capitalize on the expected federal money.

“We’re really excited about this possibility and think it’s more like a probability,” said Lynn Rex, executive director of the municipalities group. “This is on a fairly fast track.”

Obama aides have talked of a stimulus bill in the neighborhood of \$500 billion to \$700 billion, much of it for infrastructure needs.

An aide to Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., said there’s talk of the new Congress passing the plan in time for Obama to sign the bill into law on Jan. 20, the day he will be inaugurated.

“There is a lot of support on both sides of the aisle to make something involving infrastructure happen quickly,” said Jake Thompson, the aide. “You could provide an awful lot of jobs and money going into the economy.”

The Nebraska Roads Department is preparing to shut down several projects because of a drop in federal funding caused by lower gas tax revenue. That decline, in turn, is prompting higher-than-normal layoffs in the road-building industry.

An informal survey by the Nebraska chapter of the Associated General Contractors found that highway construction firms planned to lay off 4,500 to 5,000 workers — about three to four times higher than normal — because of the general slowdown in road building.

“We helped out Wall Street. Now there’s a consensus that we need to help out Main Street,” Bill Mueller, a lobbyist who represents the Nebraska contractors, said of the economic stimulus plan.

Gov. Dave Heineman was among those who met this week with Obama at the National Governors Association meeting in Philadelphia. The governors made a plea for help meeting the increased costs of social services and for more public works spending.

After the meeting, Heineman said he would support federal help for state projects that already were planned. He said all states should be treated fairly.

A Heineman spokeswoman said Thursday that the governor wants to carefully evaluate the details of the stimulus plan.

“We don’t want the ‘roads to nowhere,’ ” said Jen Rae Hein, the spokeswoman.

The Senate is expected to debate next week a \$100 billion stimulus plan that includes an \$8 billion road-building amendment sponsored by Nelson. But the bill is not expected to pass in lieu of the bigger plan being pushed by Obama.

Mike Linder, director of the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality, said his agency had

estimated that it would receive \$33 million for wastewater and sewer projects and an additional \$10 million for drinking-water projects under a measure proposed in the House.

"It's a lot of money, and it's with fewer strings attached," Linder said of Obama's proposal. "If it does pass, it's something we need to move on quickly."

**World-Herald staff writer Tom Shaw contributed to this report.**

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