

Panel approves stimulus road projects

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AUSTIN, Texas — Transportation commissioners approved \$1.2 billion in highway work Thursday to be paid for with federal economic stimulus money after adding more projects requested by local officials and benefiting economically distressed areas.

Texas Department of Transportation officials proposed that some projects be added to the \$500 million in stimulus money maintenance work approved last week and to the \$1.2 billion in major projects that were under consideration Thursday. The extra money needed to complete the added projects would come from local or state funds.

"This is a good thing for the state. We're going to employ people. We're going to put people back to work," said Commissioner William Meadows before the five-member panel's unanimous vote.

More than \$2.6 billion in transportation work will be achieved with the federal money approved Thursday once those dollars are combined with other financing, the agency said.

"Texas is making the most of our economic stimulus funds," said commission chair Deirdre Delisi. She said the decision is the result of four months of work by the agency and community leaders.

Some state lawmakers had complained this week that economically distressed areas weren't given a priority in choosing projects, as required in the federal law signed by President Barack Obama in February. The transportation department's executive director, Amadeo Saenz, said distress was not a factor in deciding which roads and bridge maintenance projects would get stimulus money.

In a letter Wednesday, U.S. Rep. James Oberstar, D-Minnesota, chairman of the congressional Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, said the government must ensure transportation spending meet all requirements, "including giving priority to economically distressed areas."

TxDOT spokesman Chris Lippincott said that requirement was taken into consideration with the group of 29 construction projects approved Thursday, as were other requirements such as a quick time frame for completing the projects and maximizing job creation and economic benefit.

Among the projects approved are ones that would widen part of Interstate 35 in Bell County; construct a new interchange at U.S. Highway 281 and Loop 1604 in San Antonio; make improvements along U.S. 281 and U.S. 59 in the Pharr and Corpus Christi area; and construct an interchange at Interstate 10 and Loop 375 in El Paso.

One of the added road projects is Cuatro Vientos, intended to relieve congestion in Laredo. Lawmakers and local officials from that border city spoke out strongly for including the project.

Waco area officials complained that improvements to Interstate 35 in their city wasn't included. Waco Mayor Virginia DuPuy said more than 100,000 vehicles per day cross the Brazos River on I-35.

Before the commission meeting, about a dozen activists gathered outside to protest the use of federal stimulus dollars on toll roads.

"It's at least double taxation, using federal tax money to toll a road — to build it and then toll a road," said Linda Curtis, director of Independent Texans, an organizing group for toll road protesters.

Associated Press writer Jackie Stone contributed to this report.