

Jan 17 2009

States eye stimulus dollars

By CHARLES OWENS
Bluefield Daily Telegraph

BLUEFIELD — State officials in West Virginia and Virginia are preparing to argue their case for millions of dollars in federal economic stimulus funds.

The massive \$825 billion financial rescue plan proposed by President-elect Barack Obama includes the creation of new roads, bridges and schools across the nation. It is being called one of the largest investments in America's infrastructure system since the creation of the federal highway system more than 50 years ago.

Matt Turner, a spokesman for Gov. Joe Manchin, said the governor is asking all state agencies to submit a list of "shovel ready" projects that can be under construction in three to six months.

"At the moment, I don't have a specific list," Turner said. "There is a concern obviously about encouraging false hope for projects."

Mike Mitchem, executive director of the King Coal Highway Authority, said the next phase of the local Interstate 73/74 corridor in Bluefield is shovel ready.

"The King Coal Highway Authority has been working closely with the Department of Highways and we are in hopes of some of the stimulus money being made available for the King Coal section in Bluefield, and all along the King Coal Highway and the Tolsia Highway," Mitchem said. "We have several projects — especially from the K.A. Ammar Interchange to the Airport Road in Bluefield that would be shovel ready. Right now we are optimistic."

Brent Walker, a spokesman for the Department of Highways, said the King Coal Highway, the Coalfields Expressway, Corridor H., the Mon-Fayette Expressway — and many other highway and bridge projects across the state — are examples of projects that could possibly qualify for federal stimulus funds.

"We are just keeping our fingers on the pulse of what we will be working with financially from any kind of stimulus plan if we are afforded an opportunity to receive it," Walker said. "It's a little premature to list specific projects. But I think it is safe to say as it relates to infrastructure needs there are many. There are certainly many worthy projects that just lack funds."

Lawmakers in Virginia also are hoping to secure federal economic stimulus funds for the construction of the Coalfields Expressway in Southwest Virginia. They are looking to Gov. Timothy M. Kaine for help.

"I see the governor in his close relationship with the president-elect as probably our best route," Delegate Dan Bowling, D-Tazewell, said.

The Coalfields Expressway is a project that is shovel ready in Southwest Virginia,

Sen. Phillip Puckett, D-Russell, said. Puckett said the Coalfields Expressway also goes hand-in-hand with the Route 460 Connector Project that links Virginia with Kentucky at the Coalfields Expressway corridor.

“It’s a project that is ready to roll,” Puckett said. “The engineering has been done. The environmental has been done.”

Puckett said he too is hopeful that Kaine can promote the importance of the Coalfields Expressway to Obama.

“His relationship with President-elect Obama can’t hurt us,” Puckett said.

– Contact Charles Owens at covens@bdtonline.com