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Local officials making priorities for stimulus money projects

By Matt Garfield - mgarfield@heraldonline.com

From an improved U.S. 21 bridge over the Catawba River to more guards at the county jail, local government officials are pursuing federal stimulus money for a host of priorities.

Some are road widenings aimed at easing traffic or kickstarting multimillion dollar private developments. Others are described as urban renewal efforts to help neighborhoods with high crime rates move toward stability.

Because so many places are competing for dollars, there is uncertainty over which requests will actually get money.

You can imagine all the other cities and counties doing what we're doing," said York County Council Chairman Buddy Motz. "Everybody is scrambling to try to get some of the funds. We just need to make sure we're in the line."

In many cases, the projects have been on the books for months or years, but sufficient money hasn't been available.

One example is the U.S. 21 bridge over the Catawba River. Local leaders have long wanted to replace the famously narrow two-lane bridge, where drivers can come within inches of each other as they pass.

But plans call for more than just a new bridge. Under an agreement between Rock Hill, Fort Mill and York County, the new version would get pedestrian and bike lanes, light poles and a new façade aimed at making it a more distinctive feature.

Supporters say the enhanced bridge could be a landmark along Interstate 77, and a popular attraction for hikers and kayakers along the Catawba River, where the Carolina Thread Trail runs through York County.

Other projects have a more direct connection to spurring private investment.

A private group planning a \$600 million redevelopment at the old Celanese site has said Cel-River Road must be improved before it can move ahead with its plans.

The proposed Riverwalk development will house one of the biggest industrial parks in the Charlotte region, along with a shopping center similar to Birkdale Village in Huntersville, N.C., and hundreds of homes and townhouses.

It will take 10 to 15 years to complete, but officials say an improved Cel-River Road is the key to getting started.

"It overshadows all the rest of them," said Rock Hill City Manager Carey Smith, in terms of economic impact and job creation. "It allows that industrial park to take off."

Hoping for road money

York County hopes to use stimulus money to finish road projects devised under Pennies for Progress, the county's 1-cent sales tax program. The county is working through the state Department of Transportation, which has the ability to spend \$463 million in highway stimulus funds.

The top priority is the S.C. 5 Bypass widening, which would widen the road from S.C. 5 west to S.C. 161. An estimated \$19 million is needed to complete the project. Other projects are listed, along with cost needed to complete them:

Highway 51 widening from U.S. 21 to the N.C. line. Cost: \$13 million

Cherry Road widening from York Avenue to Heckle Boulevard. Cost: \$4.8 million

S.C. 72 (Albright Road) widening from Black Street to Heckle Boulevard. Cost: \$8.7 million

Mount Gallant Road widening from Anderson to Celanese roads. Cost: \$7 million

Roads aren't the only items on the list. County leaders also hope to use stimulus money to hire corrections officers at the Moss Justice Detention Center. The county has already hired 16 officers, but needs another 31 to man the expanded facility.

Beginning corrections officer cost the county \$43,743 in salary and benefits per year.

"You can imagine, this is about the worst possible time to be adding 31 people," County Manager Jim Baker said. "If we're relying on our own resources, it'd be very difficult. We'd either be faced with not opening the facility or potentially pulling some of our deputies from the street."

The path to securing stimulus money is anything but direct, with various pots of dollars available in different places. Legislation approved by Congress makes money available in education, technology, law enforcement and infrastructure.

The Rock Hill school district would use stimulus money to replace funding that has been cut by the state, said Harriet Jaworowski, associate superintendent for instruction. Rather than launching new initiatives, the money would be put toward existing needs, such as tutoring programs.

Some stimulus money could go directly to neighborhoods. For example, Rock Hill wants \$180,000 to help build an asphalt trail connecting the Hagins-Fewell neighborhood to downtown.

On the Saluda Street corridor, where revitalization efforts have been under way for years, officials are seeking \$250,000 to create a gateway entrance at the S.C. 901 intersection. Plans call for a monument sign and landscaping to greet drivers entering Rock Hill's south side from I-77.

Meanwhile, the county might pursue money to create a summer work program for youth. With entry-level jobs now being taken by adults, high school and college students are expected to have a tougher time finding work when school lets out.

Included in the stimulus package is money to put youths to work picking up litter, making repairs to public buildings and doing office work.

Baker heard about the work program in a conversation just last week, and asked his staffers to look into it. It's emblematic of how this unprecedented process is playing out – the people in charge are learning as they go.

"As soon as we hear about an opportunity, we're trying to evaluate it," Baker said.

Matt Garfield 803-329-4068

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