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County transportation leaders reach out for federal funds

Shanna McCord - Sentinel staff writer

County transportation leaders are making a mad dash to get new projects lined up and ready in the event President-elect Barack Obama follows through on his idea to jumpstart the economy with an infusion of federal funds for roads, highways and bridges across the country.

The Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission on Thursday called on the county and cities of Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley, Capitola and Watsonville as well as UC Santa Cruz, Cabrillo and the Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District to compile lists of transportation projects that could begin construction in 90-180 days in hopes of qualifying for any federal money that becomes available in the Obama administration.

"We need to get started. If we wait, we won't have enough time to gear up," commission planner Rachel Moriconi said. "We need to demonstrate that these projects are beneficial and will help our transportation system."

The commissioners unanimously agreed to create a preliminary list of high-priority transportation projects in Santa Cruz County at their Feb. 5 meeting.

Projects to be considered for the stimulus money must have been already vetted for federal and state environmental issues, undergone the design process and be ready to go out for a contractor's bid, Moriconi said.

"Anything that needs more design or public process won't meet the timelines," she said.

Not having a list of projects for the federal government to consider means possibly losing out on as much as \$20 million for the region, Moriconi estimated.

The projects most likely to qualify would be those that rehabilitate streets and roads because they don't involve environmental reviews, transportation leaders said.

The county has a backlog of road repairs estimated at roughly \$100 million while the city of Santa Cruz's backlog is around \$35 million. Other area cities face similar road problems -- numerous streets in poor condition and no money to fix them.

"The opportunity is right now with paving prices at half of what they were last year," Santa Cruz Public Works Director Mark Dettle said. "The whole region would benefit by getting our roads rehabilitated. Contractors need jobs."

The commission would ultimately decide which transportation projects would receive the federal money, if and when it ever becomes available.

Moriconi said it's possible Obama could approve a stimulus plan by mid-February, though it's far from a sure thing.

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