

County transportation leaders put hands out for federal funds

by Shanna McCord

SANTA CRUZ -- If the proposed \$800 billion stimulus package passes, Santa Cruz County transportation leaders will have their hands out for up to \$13 million to fix roads, buy public buses and build more bike lanes.

The sweeping stimulus bill, including \$30 billion for road projects, is being debated on Capitol Hill.

"We desperately need money in our region for transportation projects," said Karena Pushnik of the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission, the agency in charge of administering federal and state money for local projects. "It's a moving target, and we aren't sure that we'll get any money at all."

The Regional Transportation Commission has made a list of projects countywide, along with an estimated cost, that they'd like to see completed if federal funds become available for local infrastructure.

The commission will vote at its Thursday meeting on whether to approve the list, which covers road improvements and other transportation needs from the San Lorenzo Valley to Watsonville.

The list includes \$1.5 million for rehabilitating Capitola Road; \$3 million to repave several streets in Santa Cruz; \$1 million to construct a pedestrian trail under Highway 1 along the San Lorenzo River; \$2 million for road repairs in Watsonville; \$4.5 million for county road repairs; \$1 million to repave Heller Drive at UC Santa Cruz; \$200,000 for purchasing new vanpool vehicles at UCSC and \$450,000 to restore the freeway service patrol.

Qualifying for federal transportation funds involves strict requirements.

The federal government will only approve funding for projects that have gone through the design process, obtained the necessary permits and have passed federal and state environmental standards.

At least half of the projects should be ready to start construction within 75 days, said Rachel Moriconi, a senior planner with the Regional Transportation Commission.

The other half would need to be ready by July 2010, otherwise the money would be redirected to other areas.

The federal money is especially important for Santa Cruz County, which has a \$200 million backlog in local street repairs and an estimated \$2 billion backlog in larger transportation projects such as carpool lanes from Santa Cruz to Aptos and passenger rail service, Pushnik said.

Santa Cruz Public Works Director Mark Dettle said he welcomes any money the federal government could spare to help the city smooth out rough, neglected streets.

He specifically noted Morrissey Boulevard, Market Street and West Cliff Drive as streets that need attention.

"If someone gave us \$1 million, we'll spend it putting people to work," Dettle said. "We want to be in line to spend it."