

Miami-Dade, Broward transit officials compile stimulus wish lists

Elected officials in Miami-Dade and Broward will battle over limited amounts of transportation money from the federal stimulus package.

By Alfonso Chardy

Building a truck tunnel under Biscayne Bay. Extending Metrorail to Miami International Airport. Repairing bridges in Aventura, Miami and Miami Beach. Repaving or upgrading avenues, boulevards and streets in Coral Gables, Opa-locka and Hialeah.

These are among the hundreds of dream projects commissioners and mayors in Miami-Dade County will review Friday afternoon at county commission chambers in downtown Miami during an extraordinary meeting of the Metropolitan Planning Organization -- the local panel assigned to plan local transportation projects.

The current 21 voting panel members, all 13 county commissioners and several local mayors and commissioners, plan to select projects they believe deserve money from the roughly \$261 million allocated to Miami-Dade from the \$787 billion economic stimulus package President Barack Obama signed into law this week.

BROWARD MEETING

A similar meeting has been scheduled for Friday morning by the Broward Metropolitan Planning Organization whose 19 voting members, including four county commissioners and several mayors, will also pick projects to receive the bulk of the \$70 million assigned to Broward from the stimulus package. Elected officials are meeting because 50 percent of the money must be "obligated" or approved for bid within 120 days.

The cost of all the projects submitted for consideration in Broward and Miami-Dade -- from bike paths in Coconut Creek to road repaving in Homestead -- far exceeds the more than \$331 million the two counties will receive from the stimulus package for roads, bridges and transit.

In Miami, for example, the port tunnel is expected to cost about \$1 billion if and when the contract for the massive but delayed project is approved. But officials are confident that even a small amount of money can help some of the big projects.

"Money is money," said Victoria Mallette, a spokeswoman for Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Alvarez who believes that the two chief projects that should be advanced should be the port tunnel and an extension of Metrorail to a transit and car rental facility under construction near Miami International Airport.

The wide range of small and big projects on the wish lists submitted to Broward and Miami-Dade officials could set off political and turf battles between county commissioners and local mayors as well as competition between traffic planners pushing a pet project and local officials who want money spread more widely.

Asked about the recommendation from Broward traffic managers that all Broward road stimulus money be assigned to construction of a four-lane bridge in Deerfield Beach, Roy Gold -- a Coral Springs city commissioner who belongs to the Broward panel -- said the recommendation could be ignored.

'GREAT THING'

"That's the great thing about recommendations," said Gold, "you can take them or leave them."

In Miami-Dade, county officials are pushing the massive truck tunnel from Interstate 395 to the Port of Miami and an extension of the elevated Metrorail train system from the existing Earlington Heights station along the Airport Expressway and a transit and car rental hub near Miami International Airport.

But cities, towns and villages have submitted a myriad of individual projects that could spark debate about whether it's better to devote stimulus funds to one or two large projects or many smaller ones.

Regardless of what projects are selected, everyone is hoping the money will create new jobs and put the distressed economy back on the road to recovery.