

opinion

viewpoint

Federal stimulus money is already at work

The federal stimulus money is intended to get people working in Minnesota right away.

Of the \$9.1 billion coming to Minnesota, about \$600 million in stimulus money is allocated for transportation purposes, according to the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT).

Breaking that down, \$502 million will be used to build roads and bridges, with MnDOT getting 70 percent for state transportation projects and local governments getting 30 percent.

Half of MnDOT's share, \$350 million (70 percent), is intended to be spent for greater Minnesota projects and half for the metropolitan area.

The good news is that bid letting for the first 11 projects, worth \$46 million, was last Friday. That action meets the criteria of doing shovel-ready jobs right away.

Deciding on the metropolitan area transportation projects is a little more complicated and slower.

The Metropolitan Council, which is appointed, has the authority to decide if the transportation projects fit its Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) and the council also has final say on which projects get funded.

The Council, however, depends heavily on recommendations from its Transportation Advisory Board (TAB). It is

comprised of 33 members from elected officials, representatives of government agencies involved in transportation and citizen members.

The TAB has to decide what metropolitan projects get \$75 million of stimulus money — ones that are design ready and can be started in 120 days.

There could be a holdup over deciding if this \$75 million should be spent on either a couple of major projects, or on smaller ones that have been identified by local units of government.

The two major projects, which if funded would take most of the money, are the extension of Highway 610 to Highway 81, and the recon-

struction of the Interstate 494 and Highway 169 interchange. Battle lines apparently are being drawn on these major projects between those in the northern region who want Highway 610 extended and those in the southern region who favor reconstruction of the Highway 494 and 169 bottleneck, which according to reports is not design ready.

Meanwhile, the TAB has narrowed its list of smaller projects that are "shovel ready."

An example of one smaller project is redoing the interchange at Interstate 35E and Highway 14 in Lino Lakes. Anoka County and Lino Lakes have spent money to get this project ready and construction

could start right away with \$8 million in stimulus dollars.

Using the money for smaller projects where money also can be contributed by local units of government makes the most sense.

The TAB has as its main criteria for selection, job creation, project readiness and the economic development.

That's the right criteria and it's up to the TAB to fund the shovel-ready projects, and putting politics aside, the Metropolitan Council should follow its recommendations.

— **Don Heinzman, ECM Publishers**