

AWARDING OF CONTRACTS WILL ESTABLISH A TRANSPORTATION AGENCY RECORD

State officials set to roll on stimulus roadwork

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Work should start next month on nearly \$250 million of road and bridge improvement projects across the state that are being paid for with federal stimulus money, state officials said Friday.

"This is going to help significantly," Gov. Brad Henry said. "I don't know of any state in the country that has turned down these transportation stimulus dollars. It will, in fact, stimulate and help our economy. It will create jobs. It will help Oklahoma companies. These dollars don't just fall in a hole somewhere; they turn over multiple times in our economy."

The projects are scheduled to be awarded Monday by the state Transportation Commission.

They represent the highest dollar amount of transportation work to be awarded in a single day, Transportation Department Director Gary Ridley said. The amount is close to three times larger than any other single monthly awarding of bids in department history.

The \$250 million in federal stimulus funds will fund 42 projects, including interstate repairs, major bridge rehabilitations and safety initiatives such as cable barriers.

Projects under consideration include resurfacing or reconstruction projects on more than 43 miles of Interstate 40 in six counties, improvements to 24 miles of Interstate 35 in four counties and resurfacing a seven-mile stretch of Interstate 44 in Cleveland, McClain and Oklahoma counties.

"It will also obviously provide a major shot in the arm to our economy," Henry said. "The projects are spread all across the state of Oklahoma."

Road to recovery

The projects will create short-term jobs and "in the long term will lay a foundation for a stronger economy through a safe and efficient transportation network," he said.

Ridley said most projects should take about 18 months to complete. Bids came in 15 to 18 percent under estimates; a number of Oklahoma companies submitted bids, he said.

"We feel very comfortable and very confident that we're going to see a lot of work done this summer," Ridley said.

The projects were selected from the department's eight-year construction program that weren't among those scheduled to start this summer, he said.

The Transportation Department has placed the projects on an accelerated construction schedule to take advantage of the spring and summer months when weather-related delays are fewer, Ridley said.

As part of the \$787 billion federal economic stimulus plan, Oklahoma has received about \$340 million to be used for road and bridge projects. The rest of the projects will be awarded at Transportation Commission meetings through June, Transportation Department spokeswoman Terri Angier said. One of the bigger projects, a \$70 million project repairing bridges in Tulsa, is scheduled to be awarded next month.

Ridley said about \$26 million of the federal stimulus money is earmarked for county governments to work on 47 bridges, and another \$26 million is set aside to help about 45 small towns and cities put in handicapped-accessible sidewalks along the state highway system so they are in compliance with unfunded federal mandates.

Transportation Department officials began identifying "shovel-ready" road and bridge projects last year when discussions started on an economic stimulus plan. The department identified \$1.1 billion in projects. If other states are unable to meet federal deadlines for starting their projects, Oklahoma could receive additional stimulus money for road and bridge work.

Work should begin on most of the projects being awarded Monday within 45 days after March 2, when the federal money was made available to Oklahoma, Ridley said.