

Valley set to pursue stimulus funding

by **J. Craig Anderson** - Jan. 10, 2009 12:00 AM

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Government officials in the Valley want to make sure their own bureaucracies don't restrict the flow of federal economic-stimulus dollars headed for Arizona.

County and municipal leaders said they were planning to apply for billions of dollars in funding promised by President-elect Barack Obama to fund public-works projects such as roads and schools, bridges and buildings, and public services such as light rail.

Most civic leaders appeared to agree that bringing jobs and economic stability to the area should be their priority during what is expected to be the worst year in recent decades for employment.

Some of them lamented the lengthy process for acquiring private land, assessing the environmental impact of a project and dealing with fair-wage requirements that accompany federal money.

Hundreds of government and construction-industry representatives met Thursday in Phoenix for discussions about ways to ensure Arizona receives its full share of the stimulus dole.

The public-private summit was sponsored by Arizona State University's Alliance for Construction Excellence and featured speakers such as Phoenix Mayor Phil Gordon, Metro light rail CEO Rick Simonetta and state Department of Transportation Director Victor Mendez.

Construction-industry experts expect as many as 30 percent of the workers in their industry could be laid off in 2009 without help from federal projects.

Likewise, local-government officials say there is a chance municipalities would have to stop providing essential services if they did not soon see an infusion of cash.

Gordon appealed to both government and industry to cooperate like never before, and help develop a "brand-new road map" to navigate the slow economy.

He said Phoenix would seek economic-stimulus funding of \$2.1 billion for capital-improvement projects that he said would employ 56,000 workers of all types, from laborers to lawyers.

Without those projects, there's a good chance Phoenix would have to continue cutting jobs and services, he said.

"We simply cannot continue to cut and still have the kind of community we want to live in," Gordon said.

Janet Palacino, Maricopa County facilities-management director, agreed that securing Arizona's share of the stimulus money might require taking some shortcuts. She said the county is seeking about \$1.5 billion in funding.

"We need to break from tradition of how we normally do things," Palacino said. "If we take four months to go through a permit process, that's not going to help us very much."

Several leaders said they want to streamline the bureaucratic process for planning and executing large government construction projects to capitalize on the feds' limited-time offer.

But a few said they were troubled by suggestions that Arizona leaders relax their standards to fast-track proposals for federally funded projects.

"To believe that the Obama administration would favor or even look favorably upon a project because it has some sort of relaxation of environmental regulations . . . misunderstands where that administration is trying to go," said Randy Serraglio, of the Center for Biological Diversity.

But several environmental and property-rights advocates who did not attend the meeting agreed with the attendees' comments.

Tempe environmental lawyer Howard Shanker said he understood why local leaders were inclined to put jobs before the environment in this case.

"If you wake up in the morning and you can't feed your family, you're not going to be worrying about global warming or riparian areas," he said.

Still, Shanker said there was no reason why following environmental laws would put Arizona at a disadvantage when competing with other states for funds.

"Everyone else will have to do the same thing," he said.

Tim Keller, of the libertarian-leaning Institute for Justice, said there was already a process for fast-tracking the taking of private property through eminent domain.

Keller said he supported the idea of making government leaner and faster as long as it didn't try to seize private land for the wrong reasons.

"There's no question that government can take the land if they're dealing with a genuine public use, and there's a legitimate public benefit," he said.

John Yoder of Star Roofing in Phoenix, a summit participant, said he hoped stimulus funds would keep the construction industry afloat.

Still, Yoder said he didn't favor fast-tracking the eminent-domain process unless the people whose property gets taken also benefit.

"That's kind of a two-edged sword," he said. "I'm not a real proponent of eminent domain."