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South Florida's wish list for stimulus funds tops \$3 billion

BY CHARLES RABIN

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The wish list is enormous: From \$4 million worth of fire sprinkler systems and alarm upgrades at Miami International Airport, to millions of dollars of new ramps on the Palmetto Expressway, to a new \$100 million interchange on Oakland Park Boulevard west of Florida's Turnpike in Broward County.

In total, the regional authorities that oversee infrastructure concerns at our ports, on our roads, and along our rail systems, have five-year plans in place with hundreds of unfunded projects that would cost more than \$3 billion.

Which begs the question: Are any of those wished-for projects closer to reality with President Barack Obama's announced plans earlier this week for a \$50-billion stimulus package aimed at infrastructure needs around the country?

The consensus: It's way too early to know, according to Jose Mesa, who directs Miami-Dade's Metropolitan Planning Organization.

The agency oversaw the dispersal of about \$126 million in federal stimulus money last year.

"We really have no new information on this stimulus," Mesa said.

Most of that money was spent on a new interchange between the Dolphin and Palmetto expressways, the remainder on electronic tolling and the final segment of the 18-mile stretch just south of Florida City, leading into the Keys.

In Broward, which last year received close to \$200 million, the vast majority of the incentive was spent on the Dixie Highway Bridge connecting Broward to Palm Beach County, and on the installation of toll express lanes like those that now adorn Miami-Dade's I-95.

Of the president's new initiative, Mesa and others warn there isn't even a bill created yet. And when or if one is written, it needs congressional approval, which promises to be a bitter battle. After that, the money would be split up state by state. Then the state passes down a share to each of Florida's 67 counties.

Essentially, the president was making a Labor Day speech amid tough economic times, say transportation officials, while warning everyone not to get too excited.

"We don't know what conditions or requirements would come with any bill," said Carlos Roa, transportation systems manager for the MPA.

In other words, would any money coming our way be required to go toward construction-ready projects? Could they be funded or unfunded plans? Can we use the money to fix our streets, roads, highways?

And the economic jolt could be less than the \$126 million Miami-Dade received last year. Simple math shows breaking the \$50 billion between the 50 states, then dividing the state's share by its 67 counties,

means Miami-Dade could receive even less than it did in 2009 -- and, in all likelihood, not until some time late next year.

MANY NEEDS

Yet the region's needs are grand, according to the MPO:

- A new \$3.9 million runway is needed at Homestead General Airport.
- Southwest Eighth Street in Little Havana needs \$1 million worth of drainage repairs and resurfacing.
- And for only \$15 million, we can build facilities to support a ferry service at the Port of Miami -- though that's probably not a priority right now with the \$1 billion port tunnel construction under way.

Broward needs \$57 million worth of new buses, and \$9 million worth of new bicycle facilities.

Johnson Street in Hollywood needs a \$170,000 bike lane.

Miami-Dade Commissioner Katy Sorenson, who sits on the MPO, said she'd like to see the Florida East Coast Railway up and running from Jupiter to Miami. It's along a coastal ridge, Sorenson explains, and goes through the center of several urban cores. "It would be great transportation for many people in the region," she said.

George Brummer, the vice mayor of Pompano Beach, who also sits on the Broward's MPO, echoed Sorenson's mass transit concern, calling the linkage of the FEC corridor along the east coast, "essential."

"We pretty well built out the roads," in Broward, said Brummer. "We can't do anything, any more with them."

Another MPO member, Miami Commissioner Francis Suarez, said he would like to see "a true mass transit system like in Washington D.C., Boston, Paris, or London. The trick would be a sales pitch to convince somebody in Washington we're the next big city."

'TOUGH SELL'

But that, Suarez said, would be "such a tough, tough sell right now."

The commissioner points to past failed local initiatives like the 2002 half-cent sales tax, which passed a public vote with promises of Metrorail expanding to all corners of the county, and other transportation initiatives.

Those plans never materialized as the county promised more than it could deliver, and diverted funds to repair old mistakes.

Still, Dade and Broward's needs go on: \$4 million for new housing for the county's K9 unit at MIA, another \$100,000 for a bridge over the Tamiami Canal near the Palmetto, even \$642,000 worth of emergency generators at the seaport.

In Fort Lauderdale MPO members would like to spend \$124 million on light rail that connects to a downtown transit circulator.

State Rep. Julio Robaina, R-South Miami, a member of the MPO earlier this decade, has his own priorities.

Like the other elected leaders, his center on transportation. But unlike Sorenson and Suarez, Robaina is

focusing on highways and wants to widen the Palmetto and Dolphin expressways.

``It's horrible, horrible," Robaina said of the connectors linking all four corners of the county. ``Now, at any given time of day you travel those roads there's traffic. It's very very dangerous."

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