

Texas risks losing \$31 million in federal transportation funding

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IRVING -- More than \$473 million earmarked years ago by Congress for transportation projects remains unspent, including nearly \$31 million in Texas, and federal officials declared Friday that states have until year's end to spend the money or risk losing it.

"There are a lot of crumbling roads, crumbling bridges, crumbling transit projects. We're ready to put the money to work now," Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said during a news conference call. "There is pent-up demand to fix infrastructure."

Texas officials, several of whom were attending a Transportation and Infrastructure Summit on Friday in Irving, said the move by Washington wouldn't have a major impact on ongoing road work in the region -- although a list of earmarks published Friday by the Transportation Department includes relatively small amounts of money for a handful of major projects in Dallas-Fort Worth.

Earmarks are often used by members of Congress to push pet projects forward. Often, the strategy involves inserting a sentence or two into a bill that may or may not have pertain to the bill's main purpose.

Earmarks weren't allowed in the most recent two-year transportation funding bill passed by Congress, but \$473.3 million remains unspent from earmarks approved by Congress in 2003-06.

Tower 55

LaHood said each state can spend the money for its original purpose or for another transportation project. The governor of each state will have until Oct. 1 to declare the intentions for the funds, and until Dec. 31 to obligate the money.

LaHood defended the decision to re-purpose the transportation funding less than three months before an election, saying the timing wasn't politically motivated but was aimed at the upcoming end of road work season in many cold-weather states.

Even officeholders on the other side of the aisle from President Barack Obama's Democratic administration said they favor any effort to clear the books of unspent funds.

"One of the drawbacks of earmarks is there's not enough money to get a project done. It's often just enough to keep it going," said state Rep. Linda Harper-Brown, R-Irving. "So, get out there and get it spent. We've got the projects."

In all, 22 earmarks in Texas remain unspent, including \$1.5 million for Peach Street access improvements in Fort Worth. Officials from the North Central Texas Council of Governments said Friday afternoon that they will check on the precise source of funding for Peach Street, but that in all likelihood the money is part of the Tower 55 project.

Tower 55 is a \$91 million project -- including \$34 million awarded by LaHood in 2010 -- that includes adding a north-south rail line and expanding existing lines in the railroad intersection just southeast of downtown Fort Worth. It's widely regarded as one of the most congested rail intersections in the United States and is known for causing train backups that block residential streets in neighborhoods near downtown.

Other local projects

The unspent earmark is likely just one of several small portions of money chipped into the project, one council of governments official said.

Three other unspent earmarks are in the Denton and Dallas areas, but those funds are still needed, said Bill Hale, district engineer with the Texas Transportation Department.

Those projects are \$7.8 million for an Interstate 30 bridge replacement near downtown Dallas, \$983,000 for Interstate 35E expansion and \$1.98 million for an I-35E bridge at Loop 288/U.S. 77 in Denton.

Federal Highway Administrator Victor Mendez, speaking at the transportation summit, didn't address the unspent earmark funds. He praised North Texas officials for partnering with private developers to build big-dollar projects such as the DFW Connector, a \$1 billion makeover of the Texas 114/121 corridor in Grapevine.

"Big things aren't created unilaterally with one person, group, city, county or one company. It is because of people working together," Mendez told about 200 people during a luncheon speech.

"Yesterday when I was landing, coming into DFW, I'm very familiar with the DFW Connector. I really think about how many people are working on that job. We're really investing taxpayers' dollars. I looked down. You see all the equipment that's down there. You have equipment scattered throughout that whole corridor. I've got to believe there's hundreds of people working on that project, and that's what it's all about."

Mendez also said he spent part of Friday morning talking with officials in the office of U.S. Rep. Kay Granger, R-Fort Worth, about transportation needs related to the Trinity River Vision project.

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