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Are stimulus road dollars being divvied up fairly?

Atlanta, rest of the state differ on how the nearly \$1 billion is being doled out

By **ARIEL HART**

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For those who think state government is out to get metro Atlanta, you're right — just look at how the state is doling out Georgia's stimulus road dollars.

For every thousand dollars metro Atlanta contributes to the economy, so far it's getting back \$1.37 from the stimulus road fund. The rest of the state is getting \$2.02.

On the other hand, if you think metro Atlanta is the 800-pound gorilla getting more than its fair share, cheer up, you've got your evidence too. From the same stimulus-funded road projects.

It's all in how you look at the nearly \$1 billion Georgia is getting for roads from the federal stimulus, and what you think of the way Georgia has allocated the first \$591.8 million.

So far, metro Atlanta is getting \$66.81 per person in the area, while the rest of the state is getting \$56.06.

If one region has bragging rights— or griping rights — calculating which one it is a tricky business. "I don't really think the measures mean anything and too much should be written into them," said A.J. Robinson, president of Central Atlanta Progress, a downtown Atlanta group.

For all the data, he points out, there are few new or major projects to brag about. Strict requirements that the projects be ready-to-go favored re-pavings and repairs, and they have made up the majority of the projects. Those are necessary but more mundane than brand-new roads or bridges that could make a dent in congestion and a big impression on drivers. Almost all are projects that were previously approved, so they have merely been saved from funding cuts. Also, in order to spread the financial benefit to as much of the state as possible, the state Department of Transportation decided early on to do a lot of smaller projects rather than concentrating the money in a few big ones.

The \$300 million that has yet to be allocated may produce more new and desirable projects, since planners have had a few months to finish preparatory work, rather than just picking whatever was ready to go.

In any case, the point of the stimulus wasn't transportation, so much as propping up the economy by pumping money into paychecks, fast.

"The main point of the stimulus is to create jobs and sustain the jobs that are already in the industry," said Gerald Ross, chief engineer of the state DOT.

What the stimulus road money has mostly done so far in Georgia is prevent some layoffs among road contractors. Those jobs often reside in the general area where the projects are located, though not necessarily in the same county.

Georgia is expecting \$932 million altogether for roads. Part of that goes directly to urban areas, but the state controls the majority. More than half has already been allocated. A separate, smaller pot of money is going to mass transit systems like MARTA.

Officials from cities across the U.S. voiced concern from the beginning of the stimulus that they wouldn't get their fair share. Because the states, not city governments, would be dividing up much of the highway money, they feared that rural and exurban politics would hold sway, as they often do in state legislatures.

DOT spokesman David Spear said DOT used only objective criteria, like the rating of a road's pavement or concrete deterioration, to rate projects' worthiness and rank them for a chance at funding.

Still, the result appears differently to different people. Some city of Atlanta officials remain concerned, saying sending so much money away from metro Atlanta is inefficient.

"The metro region is by far the economic engine for the entire state," said Luz Borrero, deputy chief operating officer for the city of Atlanta, noting that's a role expected to grow. "We don't believe the current investments are designed to keep up with that growth."

The director of the University of Georgia's Selig Center for Economic Growth agreed that the money should go where the economy is.

"We got a stimulus package that in my opinion is kind of low in terms of its economic stimulus per dollar, and high in political stimulus per dollar," said the director, Jeffrey Humphreys.

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A spokesman for Gov. Sonny Perdue bridled at such criticism of the allocations, and points out that metro Atlanta got more per person so far. "If the last year has taught us anything, it's that you can find an economist to say anything," said the spokesman, Chris Schrimpf.

It's that per-capita advantage to Atlanta that bothers another economist, Rajeev Dhawan, director of the Economic Forecasting Center at Georgia State University. Simply put, the money should go where the people are, he said.

"That's what determines the need," Dhawan said.

When he learned that economists differed on which measure to take, Dhawan was not surprised. "It's like defining beauty, you know?" he said.

These figures are from cost estimates for projects that Gov. Sonny Perdue has approved so far from the \$932 million for highways that Georgia expects to receive from the federal stimulus.

Metro Atlanta:

Total project dollars so far: \$352,705,392

Per capita: \$66.81

Per \$1,000 of Gross Domestic Product: \$1.37

Rest of Georgia:

Total project dollars so far: \$239,148,263

Per capita: \$56.06

Per \$1,000 of Gross Domestic Product: \$2.02

Sources: Office of Gov. Sonny Perdue; U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis; U.S. Census; (latest figures: GDP 2006; census 2007)

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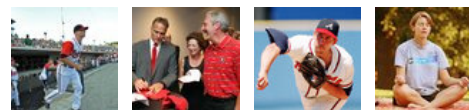
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