

# Officials say stimulus money is nice — but not nearly enough

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While federal stimulus money is welcome on several projects in northern Colorado, the money isn't nearly enough to address the region's vast infrastructure needs, officials told Rep. Betsy Markey on Saturday.

Markey, a Democrat and freshman representative in Colorado's 4th Congressional District, heard from an array of interests in the region — agriculture, transportation and environment — during a 2 1/2-hour forum, attended by about 60 people, at Greeley Central High School.

Carl Maxey, representing the Northern Colorado Legislative Alliance, told Markey that while the portion of federal stimulus money headed to transportation projects in Weld and Larimer counties is nice, "We're still way short of where we need to be."

He said that transportation infrastructure is the cornerstone of the regional economy and that state and federal fuel taxes, instituted in the early 1990s, are not keeping pace with growth and maintenance needs.

Russ George, head of the Colorado Department of Transportation, said costs for road construction and maintenance have accelerated while revenue streams have remained stagnant.

"Our buying power is 60 percent less now than it was in 1991," he said. "Our budget this year has the same buying power as CDOT had in 1983. We're trying to operate a 2009-10 transportation system in Colorado on a 1983 budget."

For that reason, George said, important transportation projects across the state can't get funded.

Nonetheless, the federal stimulus will get about \$56 million to CDOT's region four — Weld and Larimer counties and northeastern Colorado — and nine projects, none in Greeley, will begin within the next three months.

The reason for projects being chosen, George said, was their shovel-readiness and ability to hit the federal act's time frame of beginning each project within 120 days or risk losing the money to other states.

"These (projects) that were chosen were already percolating up to the top," George said. "If more money comes later we will keep working down the list."

Agriculture representatives spoke in support of Senate Bill 108, which would allow trucks to haul greater weights and add an axle to tractor trailers. If passed by the Colorado Legislature, the bill could result in fuel savings of 20 percent, said Byron Weathers of the Colorado Corn Growers.

Kent Pepler, of the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union, said farmers need lower fuel costs, improved transportation infrastructure and stronger credit options to ensure the nation's food-production needs.

He said agriculture's biggest problem is the "mass exodus" of young people from family farms.

“The average age of a farmer is 55 years old,” Pepler said. “America as a whole needs to take an interest in the family farming economy and food production, and we need to create an environment that keeps our young people at home on the farm so we can have sustainability.”

Markey said she is grateful to be serving on panels — the House transportation/infrastructure and agriculture committees — that are key to northern Colorado.

She noted that money devoted to infrastructure projects, which should help the hard-hit construction sector, was fortunately left intact while the stimulus bill moved through Congress.

“That is a way to jump-start our economy and invest in critical transportation needs here in northern Colorado,” Markey said.

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