

'Accelerate Florida' road projects may be more salesmanship than economic boost

Starting road work sooner is supposed to spark employment

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TALLAHASSEE - It was sold as an economic steroid shot.

Confronting a souring jobs picture, Gov. Charlie Crist announced in August a program called "Accelerate Florida" that would speed up already planned road-building and school construction to try to stimulate the economy.

In a letter to president-elect Barack Obama this month, he claimed the 179 road projects and \$1.4 billion in spending was "creating an estimated 38,000 jobs and pumping money into Florida's economy sooner than previously planned."

But Accelerate Florida may be more salesmanship than substance. For South Florida, the program amounts to moving up the start date of 40 already-planned road expansions and resurfacing by a month or two.

While the governor says starting the projects earlier will put people to work sooner, economists say it won't stimulate the economy because the road work was already scheduled to start this fiscal year.

What's more, the governor and Legislature actually diverted \$300 million from Florida's road-building program last spring to balance the budget. For the first time in years, Florida is spending less on transportation projects this year — \$7.3 billion in state and federal funding — than it did the previous fiscal year.

Records released by the governor's office said that the longer-term effects of the diversion would "result in a reduction to transportation project commitments of approximately \$420 million annually."

In Broward, Palm Beach and Miami-Dade counties, only one of the 40 sped-up projects appears on track to start six months earlier than planned.

Of the \$188.8 million in accelerated South Florida projects, \$19.3 million are for road re-surfacing that will start one month sooner than planned — which the Florida Department of Transportation accomplished by shortening its advertising period for the jobs from 60 days to 30 days.

Another \$26.1 million in road repaving that the state has "accelerated" isn't scheduled to start until August or September.

Still, the governor said this week he was confident the effort would result in employment gains.

"Imagine you're an unemployed road worker. At some point in the future, you may have the opportunity to get a job in June," Crist said. "Because this project gets accelerated a few months or six months, you get the chance to work today."

Crist's claim to Obama that the program was "creating" 38,000 jobs is also a little over-hyped, said University of Central Florida economist Sean Snaith.

That figure is derived from an economic model that says every \$1 billion spent on highways "supports" 28,000 jobs, from road workers to cement and asphalt manufacturers to steel workers, architects and engineers.

But the vast majority of those workers aren't idled waiting for government work to come along, Snaith said.

Crist's letter to Obama was intended to get Florida moved up on the list of states that will compete for a possible economic stimulus package of \$600 billion or more.

Last week, Crist presented Obama with \$6.9 billion in Florida highway, airport, seaport and mass transit projects that are ready to start.

Unlike Accelerate Florida, the federal plan would inject new money into the state's economy and would be much more likely to boost economic activity.

In South Florida, the DOT plans to ask the Obama administration for \$212 million to extend the Interstate 96 toll express lanes from the Golden Glades interchange to Fort Lauderdale. No other projects were included from Broward and Palm Beach counties.

In Miami-Dade, the state is looking for \$757 million. Nearly three-fourths of that would go toward the reconstruction of the Palmetto Expressway/Dolphin Expressway interchange. About \$7.8 million would be spent on widening ramps at the Ives Dairy Road exit on I-95 near Aventura.

The criteria required that projects be ready for construction within 90 to 120 days. That means projects that are a work in progress — such as the Dixie Highway flyover in Deerfield Beach and the Northwest Seventh-Ninth avenue connector in Fort Lauderdale — couldn't qualify.

"We needed plans that were complete and on the shelf. We have a lot of projects under way in the middle of the process, but they didn't meet the deadline and time frame provided," said Stacy Miller, a DOT engineer.