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N.C. mayors extend palms

DOT also has list for Obama's eyes

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Leaders of North Carolina cities are intensifying their lobbying for shares of the billions in aid that President-elect Barack Obama wants to restart America's economy.

Raleigh Mayor Charles Meeker will hold a news conference today to release a list of projects the city hopes will be considered under any federal aid package.

"We really don't know exactly how the federal program is going to roll out. It hasn't been developed," Meeker said. "But we intend to have a menu of options so that however it does roll out we'll be ready to participate."

Earlier this month, Obama told the nation's governors that he supports an economic stimulus project that could save or create 2.5 million jobs. Thus far, Obama and his aides have not indicated how such an aid package might be structured or what projects might be eligible.

Obama aides and congressional leaders have said the package could exceed \$500 billion over two years.

Raleigh came up with its list by asking its department heads to identify unfunded road, sewer and parks projects that can be started within the next six to 12 months. The list also includes alternative energy projects that are in line with Obama's goal of reducing the country's reliance on foreign oil.

Meeker said the energy projects include installing more LED lights in the city's parking garages and placing solar panels on public buildings and on the city's waste water treatment facility that could generate more than a megawatt of power.

"Since there's not as much wind in this area of North Carolina, we'll be focusing more on solar," he said.

Julie Aberg Robison, Cary's mayor pro tem, said she is advocating for Cary to create a similar list. "It would be wise of us to do so," she said.

Efforts to discuss Durham's and Chapel Hill's lobbying efforts with officials there were unsuccessful.

Mayors coordinate

The amount of federal money available to municipalities such as Raleigh and Cary likely depends heavily on how officials decide to allocate the money, and whether they target economically hard hit areas. Although local governments in the Triangle have felt the fallout from the national lending crisis and the housing slump, areas such as Michigan, California and Florida have fared much worse.

Julie White, director of the N.C. Metropolitan Mayors Coalition, said that's one reason Raleigh and other North Carolina cities need to articulate their needs and advocate for aid.

The coalition, which includes mayors of the state's 26 largest cities, has formed a committee headed by Robison and Rocky Mount's mayor to coordinate their message with federal officials.

"Our state isn't suffering as much as others, but we have overwhelming needs," White said.

The other worry for North Carolina municipalities is that little or no aid will go directly to cities.

Transportation officials in 49 states have already submitted lists detailing all the unfunded highway and bridge projects that could be started immediately if federal funds became available. The N.C. Department of Transportation list includes 296 projects totaling \$5.17 billion.

Who decides?

Charlotte Mayor Pat McCrory said his biggest concern is that federal officials will distribute money to the state, which will use the same formula it normally does to distribute transportation dollars.

"Is this going to be politics as usual, or will it be distributed fairly throughout the nation," he said. "We want to be partners with the state as opposed to competitors."

Gov.-elect Beverly Perdue's office said she plans to meet with officials from the League of Municipalities, Association of County Commissioners and N.C. Metropolitan Mayors Coalition this week to discuss their concerns.

In recent years, Raleigh hasn't been overly aggressive about acquiring federal money. The city stopped paying to have a lobbyist in Washington several years ago and has received a modest \$4.3 million in federal earmarks since 2005.

City Manager Russell Allen said the list being released today is much longer and more expensive than what Raleigh typically sends to its congressional representatives each January. Among the priciest items on the list is the city's proposed \$226 million public safety center.

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BY THE NUMBERS

\$500 BILLION: projected two-year cost of aid program

\$5.17 BILLION: N.C. DOT's accounting of its unfunded projects

\$4.3 MILLION: Raleigh's federal earmarks since 2005

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