



STIMULUS: Municipalities make their bids, cross fingers

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— If President Barack Obama’s stimulus plan succeeds in sending part of an overall \$838 billion to improve the nation’s infrastructure, it could perhaps be expected to fund a few of the nearly \$2 billion worth of work recently identified throughout Erie County.

The City of North Tonawanda also recently compiled \$18 million of its own “shovel ready” maintenance and infrastructure overhauls on the Niagara County side.

“Anything they can give us would be appreciated. Hopefully it’s a big ticket item,” Town of Tonawanda Deputy Supervisor Joe Emminger said.

He and Supervisor Anthony Caruana put forth more than 20 projects entitled “infrastructure” worth about \$69 million and scores more with regard to economic development and park/trail improvement. Erie County municipalities along with the City of Buffalo chose to combine their submissions into a package already forwarded to state and federal representatives.

Grant Loomis, spokesman for Erie County Executive Chris Collins, said the master list was compiled and sent on almost a month ago.

“Mayor (Byron) Brown and the county executive were very clear that never in our wildest dreams would we expect to receive \$1.9 billion but if we got a small fraction of that here we would consider it a success,” Loomis said.

Much like the Twin Cities, the town submitted most of the projects officials could think of, some small and some large, with the expectation that maybe one or two of them may actually see federal support from the bill now on the Senate floor. Also like neighboring municipalities, many of the projects represent a significant expense that officials say will have to be tackled with or without federal money — projects to improve aging water, sewer and transportation systems which, in some cases, have been shelved for decades.

“It’s been let go for many, many years,” Caruana said of a proposed \$30 million plan to replace roughly five miles of sanitary sewer lines along Parker Boulevard and Fries Road.

Emminger said the project has been on the drawing boards for about 12 years in the absence of adequate funding channels, and that “our big projects are going to be infrastructure, and some economic development.” That is the theme on both sides of the Erie/Niagara border.

The Northern Youngman Commerce Center, for example, includes several of the town’s Riverview business developments set rather unpleasantly next to a place known as “the mud flats,” between Interstate 290 and the former Town of Tonawanda landfill in the heart of the town’s Empire Zone.

Several unmitigated brownfield sites, Caruana said, could be cleaned up and linked to the existing business park by funding a roadway to connect the two sites.

Over in North Tonawanda, City Engineer Dale Marshall’s priority is to revamp the bridge to Tonawanda Island for \$2,800,000. The island is where officials hope increased industry and possibly residential developments will one day flourish.

City of Tonawanda Mayor Ron Pilozzi and Administrative Assistant Sam Iraci outlined about \$8 million in proposals, proportionately less for the city of 2.5 square miles.

“One that comes to mind real quick is Spaulding Fibre,” Pilozzi said.

The city is asking for \$3 million to bolster the \$21.4 million already earmarked for the project, to complete environmental cleanup, construct access roads and bring full circle the vision for an industrial center years in the making.

Another project would entail razing the city’s defunct water plan behind City Hall at a cost of about \$600,000,

to make way for future development there, too.

Seven projects in total also include infrastructure items like \$1.4 million to replace a culvert on Niagara Street.

Iraci said the spirit behind the projects they identified was to promote future revenue-makers, such as through taxes on new business, rather than simply “throwing a whole bunch of things at the wall.”

It was a challenge, however, for him, Pilozzi, City Treasurer Joseph Hogencamp and City Engineer Jason LaMonaco to compile the list even as the details are hashed out in Washington and before a foundation to disburse the money was in place.

“It’s not like we had a problem with it but it was very difficult for us to come up with things that quickly, but we were able to come up with some meaningful projects,” he said.

In one instance, they had to submit a detailed list to Sen. Antoine Thompson, D-Buffalo, apart from the final wish list to be passed on to the county executive.

“We had just the rest of the workday,” Iraci said.

“We all understand the reason,” he said. “They want to get people working quickly but it’s a high standard to set — spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to design it and let it sit,” he said of the program’s requirements that “shovel ready” often means the projects would somehow have to have been planned without the money to be finished.

Pilozzi talked about the need to provide both state and federal delegations with their plans, and that such government packages are usually given to the state for distribution.

“We’re not entirely comfortable that Western New York would do very well if it was left up to Albany which projects to fund,” Loomis said on behalf of Collins. “The state has already indicated they would use the money to fund projects the state has previously said it would fund.”

Also, a portion of the bill touted by Sen. Charles Schumer is set to relieve Medicaid expenses paid in New York state on an individual county basis. Loomis said he is concerned Albany lawmakers should leave intact the provision he said could save Erie County about \$400,000 each week.

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Photos



090209 TON ISLE BRIDGE2 - TN/PPDOUG BENZ/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHERNORTH TONAWANDA, N.Y. - The bridge connecting Tonawanda Island and North Tonawanda is pictured, Feb. 2, 2009.



090209 TON ISLE BRIDGE3 - TN/PPDOUG BENZ/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHERNORTH TONAWANDA, N.Y. - The bridge connecting Tonawanda Island and North Tonawanda is crumbling, Feb. 2, 2009.