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## Rural Iowa benefits from transportation stimulus

- Story

MIKE GLOVER | Posted: Thursday, July 9, 2009 4:20 pm

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More than \$300 million in federal transportation stimulus money is paying for road and bridge work throughout Iowa, but the bulk of the money that's arrived so far won't be spent where most of Iowa lives.

An Associated Press analysis of federal Department of Transportation data found \$319,955,892 in stimulus money is flowing into the state for work on roads and bridges. Other transportation projects, including work on rails and trails, brings the federal stimulus spending on Iowa transportation projects so far to about \$350 million, said Iowa Department of Transportation spokesman Dan Franklin.

"On a good chunk of those, they are already out there doing the work," Franklin said.

But much of that work is happening in areas far from the state's population centers. Of the 164 projects getting the federal stimulus money, only 11 projects worth \$9 million are in Polk County, which with roughly 14 percent of the state's population is Iowa's largest. Per capita, Iowa is getting about \$107 per resident \_ but Polk County is receiving only about \$22 per person.

Linn County, home to Iowa's second biggest county population, is getting funding for only one project, largely due to an influx of spending from a separate state program. That \$830 million effort is financed through state bonds and is designed to fund flood repairs and other infrastructure work.

In Iowa's southeast corner, meanwhile, the sparsely populated Lee County \_ home to roughly 35,000 people, or around 1 percent of the state's population \_ is getting funding for seven projects worth \$14.5 million. That's roughly \$414 stimulus dollars per resident. Ringgold County, ranked next to last in population, is getting funding that amounts to \$794 per person.

State transportation officials said the county-by-county breakdown could be a bit misleading, because some projects cross county lines. But they acknowledge that rural areas will receive a big chunk of the funding, following a long tradition in Iowa. State leaders decided decades ago a system based on connecting Iowa's farms with the marketplace demanded a high concentration of roads throughout the state.

"It's the infrastructure that's necessary to connect all of Iowa with our industry \_ agriculture," said state Rep. Dave Tjepkes, a Gowrie Republican who specializes in transportation issues. "For years, that's been the primary mover of economic activity and that means we have to transport all of the raw materials to processing plants or ethanol factories. That's been the pattern for years."

Last year, the state ranked 13th in the nation in road miles, far above its 26th ranking for state size by square miles. Franklin said that with so many roads, the state needs to do a lot of resurfacing. State transportation officials closely coordinated their efforts with those steering the federal stimulus money, offering up a list of projects the state had already planned to complete.

"It was a long process, because there was a number of criteria they were looking for," Franklin said. "We were looking at projects that were ready to go so we could get the money out the door fast."

While the bulk of the money that's arrived so far is going to projects on state roads and highways, roughly \$120 million was sent to local governments for projects run by cities and counties. Officials are still working to spend that money, Franklin said.

Although Democrats hold majorities in Congress and the Iowa Legislature, there's no indication that politics played a role in transportation spending. Most counties in Republican-dominated western Iowa received funding through the program.

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