

Friday, March 19, 2010

\$100M may go to Austin transportation projects

Construction contractors wouldn't see slowdown

Austin Business Journal - by [Jacob Dirr](#) ABJ Staff

A \$100 million November transportation bond proposal to pay for road, trail and sidewalk improvements throughout the city appears extremely likely as more than half of city council members said they support a bond election that size.

If approved by voters in November, the bond will keep money flowing to contractors who have had steady business since voters approved a \$567.4 million bond package in 2006.

The exact mix and amount of projects to be funded through the new bond will not be determined until summer, but it already seems poised for deep discussion as politics and public policy compete to shape the list.

Project opportunities are boundless. Already, a list of \$500 million worth of projects has been prioritized, and there are many more needed, Austin Public Works Director Howard Lazarus said

For example, \$824 million worth of sidewalks need to be fixed or created, he said.

If the \$100 million bond is approved this year, the contracting community won't notice a difference between projects funded by the 2006 or 2010 bond, Lazarus said.

The city will likely have to compile a new civil engineering rotation list, which is a pre-approved list of contractors for planned projects, he said. Most of the money will be devoted to construction, not design, he said.

Contracts will be ready soon after a bond is approved, as staff have been steadily planning "shovel-ready" projects in the event of federal allocations to Austin, Lazarus said.

There could be some push and pull over what staff suggests are critical needs and what politicians want to see funded.

City public works and transportation staff said in interviews they will compile a list of projects for the 2010 bond election based on existing data, stakeholder input and council direction. The city has already collected more than 1,200 potential transportation projects through public meetings as it conducts a transportation gap analysis as part of a long-term strategic mobility plan.

But a top mayoral staffer said Mayor Lee Leffingwell has support from council to seek a balanced project makeup, and dismissed a road-heavy project list, adding that there will be a focus on dispersing money for citywide projects.

Austin Transportation Department Assistant Director Gordon Derr said there are a lot of competing interests, but the process will be transparent.

"People will be able to see what is on there and why projects are on the top," he said.

In the 2006 bond, about 83 percent of the \$103 million in transportation went to roads. About \$10 million went for sidewalks and bike paths. Park trails, meanwhile, were funded from a different, \$84.7 million pot of money for parks and open space.

The entire 2010 bond discussion started as a campaign promise from Leffingwell, who sought bond funding for transportation projects, including a downtown rail line.

But Leffingwell made a surprise announcement this month that he was backing off his stance for a \$400 million 2010 bond election, amid concerns that more preliminary engineering needs to take place for the rail portion.

Instead, the mayor wants a \$100 million election this year to fund roads, sidewalks, bike lanes and trails.

Since the announcement, three other council members said they support a \$100 million package, which will consume half the city's existing bonding capacity.

Another election in 2011 will seek voter approval for rail, plus another \$100 million to fund smaller projects, the mayor's staff said.

That election will likely require a property tax hike to increase bonding capacity, but turnout could be small because high-ticket elections — such as the governor's race — happen this year, not in 2011.

Courtesy of JB Goodwin