



August 3, 2009

## Stimulus projects bring paychecks

### Federal dollars support jobs, improve roadways

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*The News Journal*

His paycheck amounts to just 0.00000002 percent of the total, but Thaddeus Cebula is grateful for his tiny sliver of the federal stimulus package.

Cebula, 27, works as a laborer for Greggo & Ferrara Inc., a New Castle construction company that landed a \$2.9 million contract to repair several sections of Wilmington's streets this summer. Until that project came along -- funded by the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act -- Cebula had been out of work and struggling to support his wife and new baby.

"I called [Greggo & Ferrara] every week, and they kept trying to find things for me to do," Cebula said. "There was nothing. I went to all kinds of companies, and they were laying people off in the summer, which is unheard of in this business."

Nearly \$140 million in stimulus money has begun flowing into Delaware transportation projects this summer. Crews are repaving, repairing, repainting and renovating roads, intersections and bridges statewide.

Thirty-eight projects are up for bid, under construction or already finished, while others -- including big ones like adding a lane to the I-95 toll plaza near Newark -- are still in the design phase.

"Anyone driving on the roads now is seeing some of that work," said Darrel Cole of the Delaware Department of Transportation.

Experts say it's too early to judge whether the stimulus is a success or failure because only about half the transportation money has been spent and another \$664 million is still coming to the state for Medicaid, health care, food stamps, education and other programs.

"You can't say it's a bust yet," said John Stapleford, a senior economist at Moody's Economy.com, which is forecasting a bigger impact from the stimulus in the second half of this year.

Yet state officials say the transportation projects have "created or retained" about 600 jobs so far.

Some, like Cebula's job, are easy to understand: He was jobless, now he's working. Others, though, seem more like a mirage coming off the road on a hot summer day.

A project that employs 10 people accounts for 10 jobs, even if those workers were already working or they worked for only a few hours a week, Cole said. Some workers may be counted more than once, first as part of one project and again as part of another, separate project.

"We were under no requirement to go back and figure out who worked where and when," Cole said. "If we were, we'd have to hire a lot of people internally to do the accounting."

## Investing in infrastructure

Proponents say there's no doubt the stimulus, especially its transportation component, is putting people to work repairing infrastructure.

President Barack Obama said Friday the package "helped us put the brakes on the recession." It also "made investments that are putting people back to work building bridges and roads, schools and hospitals."

Cebula's co-worker Ben Brindley, 28, said the stimulus package is good for everyone.

"We're cleaning up roads that need work anyway, and we're keeping guys working," said Brindley, who recently left the U.S. Army after six years as a Ranger. "I've got nothing but good things to say about the stimulus plan."

Critics, though, say it is providing only a short-term boost at the expense of real recovery.

"The federal government could pay people to go dig ditches and call that job creation," said Tad DeHaven, a budget analyst for the libertarian Cato Institute.

"What isn't seen are the jobs that aren't created" by private industry or individuals whose tax money is paying for the stimulus, he said.

"You're making the determination that government does a better job of creating prosperity than the private sector," DeHaven said.

Stapleford said some of the stimulus money will simply help states cope with the recession. Money spent on education and transportation, though, can create lasting benefits.

"If you have more infrastructure in place, you're going to be better off," Stapleford said. "My preference would be a tax cut; second in line would be transportation and education."

The stimulus also can help "stop the emotional bleeding" that is keeping people from buying cars, houses and other things because they're afraid of losing their jobs, he said.

## Traffic signal improvements

Bob Altmaier, of Talleyville, said a project near his home is a waste of \$200,000 in stimulus money: an upgrade to the signals and crosswalks on Concord Pike (U.S. 202) at Righter Parkway, at the entrance to the Concord Square shopping center, that now makes pedestrians cross traffic in three stages instead of one.

"The whole thing in my mind was just a make-work project," Altmaier said. "Yes, I like the stimulus, but let's fix something that really needs fixing."

Cole said the changes were part of a total safety upgrade at the busy intersection. The main crosswalk now runs with traffic coming out of the shopping plaza and allows traffic signals to operate with less delay, he said.

DelDOT is spending about \$1.5 million of its stimulus money on similar traffic-signal improvements statewide.

Another \$27 million will go to road paving and rehabilitation projects, such as the one in Wilmington where Cebula and Brindley are working. That amount more than replaces the \$16 million the General Assembly cut from DelDOT's annual budget for such work because of the tight state budget.

Delaware's focus on rehabilitation and maintenance projects drew praise last month from Smart Growth America, a nonprofit coalition of government and other groups that advocates for historic preservation, the environment, farmland and open-space preservation, and neighborhood revitalization.

The group said too many states poured money into new projects, rather than maintaining existing roads and bridges. Spending \$1 on maintenance saves \$6 to \$14 in replacement costs, the group said.

## Spreading it around

Some criticism of the stimulus stems from the often-conflicting goals of the federal program.

Obama said the package should target "shovel-ready" projects that can put people to work quickly. He also said it would help rebuild America's "crumbling bridges."

But an Associated Press analysis found that tens of thousands of the nation's unsafe or decaying bridges aren't getting stimulus money because states are focusing instead on repaving roads or maintaining bridges that are already safe.

Delaware will spend about \$9.4 million of its stimulus money on painting and maintaining bridges. But its six "structurally deficient" bridges will get no stimulus money because they weren't eligible for it, said Cole of DelDOT. They were already scheduled for repair or weren't going to be "shovel-ready" for a few more years, he said.

Three Delaware bridges considered "functionally obsolete" -- which are structurally safe but lack features to accommodate traffic demand -- will get stimulus money for maintenance work. They will still be considered obsolete, though.

U.S. Rep. John Mica, the senior Republican on the House Transportation Committee, said Friday the government needs a "kick in the pants" to get stimulus money focused on repairing dilapidated bridges.

Other critics have pointed to a Federal Highway Administration report that showed only a little more than half of the stimulus money spent so far has been in economically distressed areas, which have high jobless rates or low per-capita incomes.

Kent County, which is Delaware's only area classified as economically distressed, has seen only 13 percent of the stimulus money spent so far, even though it is home to 18 percent of the state's population, according to the agency.

Cole said that's because nearly all of the roads eligible for stimulus funding are in New Castle County.

Construction contractors say there's no question the stimulus is benefiting the entire economy.

"Without it, I'd be worried where we and other companies would be," said Joe Cannon, vice president of Harmony Construction Co. in Wilmington, which has a \$2.9 million paving and rehabilitation project on Del. 4 near Newark.

"If we didn't get these two projects, we'd probably have a layoff," said Nicholas Ferrara Jr., president of Greggo & Ferrara, which also will be working on an I-95 paving project.

Brindley and Cebula say critics who scoff at the short-term nature of the stimulus-related jobs don't understand how important they are to the workers.

"Six months of solid work is great when you're coming off three months of nothing," Brindley said.

## Additional Facts

Train station restoration under way

Restoration and repair work on Wilmington's century-old train station is in full swing. Vice President Joe Biden, who as a senator commuted to Washington on Amtrak almost daily, kicked off the \$32 million project in May.

About \$21 million will be covered by the federal stimulus package. Work has begun restoring the Water Street facade and the canopy over the north platform, Amtrak spokesman Cliff Cole said, as has repainting and restoration of the high-level platform between Tracks 2 and 3. In September, workers will begin constructing a temporary shelter along Water Street to accommodate passengers when the restoration of the station's interior begins in January. The project is expected to be finished by February 2011.

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