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Riverside's loss is Perris' gain in stimulus funding for highway project

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By JULISSA McKINNON
The Press-Enterprise

After a project to revamp Van Buren Boulevard's connection with Highway 91 in Riverside reaped $16 million in federal stimulus cash, officials realized the project was not "shovel-ready" enough to qualify for the federal help.

But it's not a total loss -- especially for Perris.

Officials with the Riverside County Transportation Commission will instead put the $16 million toward the next regional priority: the crossing of westbound Highway 74 and Interstate 215.

Officials said they will look to state and local coffers to cover the needed reconstruction at Van Buren and Highway 91.

Both the Van Buren and the Perris projects were spotlighted as area priorities in 1989 when voters passed Measure A, a half-cent sales tax that has raised $1 billion in transportation funds since then, according to the county's Measure A Web site.

Upgrades to Van Buren and the 91 -- an approximately $34 million endeavor -- include rebuilding ramps and widening the freeway overpass from four to six lanes.

In Perris, the almost $40 million project at westbound Highway 74 would also widen a freeway overcrossing to four lanes instead of two, as well as widen freeway on- and off-ramps.

Timing proved to be critical when it came to the federal stimulus money. To comply with the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act's schedule, a highway project had to be ready to start construction by March 2010, said Shirley Medina, the transportation commission's programming and planning manager. A project also had to have regional impact and create jobs.

The plans and right-of-way land acquisitions were not ready for the Van Buren upgrades, but they were for the Perris project.

Medina and John Standiford, the transportation commission's deputy director, expressed confidence that the $16 million needed to complete the Van Buren project will come from state coffers, most likely Caltrans.

About $14 million would come from Measure A funds, $2.3 million from the transportation commission's regional coffers and $1.5 million from the city of Riverside.

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