

Back from the Brink: The Recovery Act One Year Later Seminar

Report from: Smart Growth, Transportation and Infrastructure Break-Out Session

Moderator:

Judy Schwank, 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania

Panelists:

Paul Marchetti, Pennsylvania Infrastructure Investment Authority (PENNVEST)

Jim Ritzman, Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT)

Liz Garland, American Rivers

Kelly Lewis, Technology Council of Central Pennsylvania

Overview:

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) has had a great impact on Pennsylvania in helping to get citizens back to work, stimulating the economy and addressing long unmet needs in services and infrastructure. Most certainly the funding had a positive impact on the commonwealth's neglected and deteriorating bridges, roads, transit and water and wastewater network.

Success Stories:

The consensus reached by our panelists was that Pennsylvania was for the most part very effective in utilizing the ARRA funding allocated for infrastructure improvement.

PENNVEST was able to expand the number of wastewater and water projects completed by augmenting the stimulus funds with their own funding. They contributed \$650 million to the \$225 million in stimulus funding and used this funding for more than 169 projects. PENNVEST is geared to getting projects underway quickly and was well positioned to take advantage of the opportunities the funding offered. They streamlined the approval process for quick turnaround while still adhering to smart growth principles and only approving projects that were in accordance with local and county land use plans. They also felt that they helped to generate or preserve jobs and met or exceeded the federal guidelines for using the funding.

The ARRA funding was instrumental in other water infrastructure projects outside of PENNVEST funding including the remediation of leaking underground storage tanks, dam removals and investment in watershed programs and green infrastructure.

One success story highlighted in the presentation was a water recycling system installed in a Bedford County fire company station. This project was funded through the stimulus program.

Pennsylvania's transportation network stands to benefit from a total anticipated investment of \$1,066,273,035 of federal dollars. In 2006 the Pennsylvania Transportation Funding and Reform Commission Report identified \$1.725 billion in necessary road, bridge and transit improvements. Because of this huge unmet need, PennDOT was very effective in identifying the right projects for investment of the ARRA funds. They estimate that only 2% of the total funding was used for increased capacity. The rest of the funding was used for road resurfacing, bridge improvement and transit.

PennDOT has also tracked jobs created/saved as a result of the transportation projects on a monthly basis.

Challenges:

The consensus by the panelists and the program participants was that more time for developing a realistic strategy for utilizing the funding and planning for allocating the funding to the most appropriate projects would have been desirable. In addition, it was felt that too much time was needed to meet the reporting guidelines of the program and that time could have been better spent on implementation of the projects.

Recommendations for Future State and Federal Action

While a second round of funding would be welcome, the following suggestions were made for improving the program:

- Allocate the funding regionally so that there is maximum regional benefit from the projects implemented. Emphasize the interconnectivity among various projects.
- Ensure more openness and transparency in every aspect of the program. There should be more information provided to the public on the project selection process.
- Streamline reporting and permitting procedures for the fastest deployment of the program.
- Encourage public-private partnerships for maximum buy-in and benefit from the projects.
- Utilize the Keystone Principles across state and local agencies when determining future funding priorities.
- Allocate funding based on need rather than trying to ensure regional equity.
- Funding should be targeted to those projects like transit that have less access to other funding streams.
- Allocate funding for workforce development in infrastructure. Funding should also be allocated for capacity building so projects can be implemented on a timely basis.