

Spending stimulus funds turns challenging in Dallas-Fort Worth

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As billions of dollars in stimulus money trickles down to North Texas from Capitol Hill, some communities are nursing cases of whiplash, given the speed and volume of dollars flowing in.

Plano proposed putting federal stimulus money toward a new park, while Dallas had pitched community gardens.

The Obama administration rejected both ideas for failing to reflect the stimulus package's central aim of job growth.

In such cases, some local proposals do not fit the administration's vision for economic growth.

Others find themselves laboring to spend the money as quickly as the government wants, according to a recent federal report.

"Jumping over all the hurdles, it's a challenge," said Christina Day, Plano's community services manager.

The hiccups speak to the challenges facing government entities nationwide as they seek to absorb and spend nearly \$800 billion from the federal stimulus package passed in February.

About \$16.5 billion in stimulus money has been earmarked for Texas so far, the latest figures show. And federal officials have encouraged grant recipients to act swiftly to jump-start the economy.

Generally, the stimulus money – which is making its way to Texas through more than 20 federal agencies – appears to be flowing smoothly.

Dallas County plans to invest in an ambitious affordable housing program.

Fort Worth is putting millions into job training, bus maintenance and green building designs. Other cities are contemplating similar endeavors. And the region, collectively, is set to receive more than \$600 million for transportation projects.

But for a number of communities, putting the money into action quickly and efficiently has proven challenging.

Dallas, which is scheduled to discuss the stimulus package at a City Council meeting Wednesday, is lining up nearly \$100 million in various projects and initiatives alone. And more could be on the way.

The city originally considered building some community gardens using a \$300,000 grant from the federal Department of Energy. But energy officials opposed the request, forcing the city to consider other efforts, said Brett Wilkinson, Dallas's director of intergovernmental services.

In some instances, the grant process has produced confusion.

Fort Worth's water department applied for a \$22.6 million stimulus-backed loan to build a new pipeline and pumping station, only to be told that the project was ineligible.

The department later reapplied under a different program. The second application is valid and pending, said S. Frank Crumb, the department's director.

In late May, Plano's city council approved a measure calling for \$275,000 in federal recovery funds to help pay for a park in its historically black Douglass Community.

The project, already in Plano's plans and scheduled for completion late next year, received vetting and approval from a local citizens board.

But in June, federal housing officials urged Plano to alter the request.

They advised that "recreational and entertainment facilities and services are generally inconsistent" with the stimulus package's goals. The request was later denied.

"The money should be targeted toward projects that provide economic development," said Patricia Campbell, a spokeswoman for the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The rebuff forced Plano to find another project or lose the stimulus funds.

City officials are now scrambling to redirect the money, about \$275,000, to an overhaul of Plano's bustling day labor center.

Some entities, including the Texas Department of Transportation, have identified backup projects should the federal government deny any proposals.

Setbacks aside, North Texas officials say there is no shortage of need.

For instance, billions in transportation projects still need funding even with the stimulus package, said Amanda Wilson, a spokeswoman for the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

"If any of these projects falter," she said, "there are dozens waiting in line ready to go."

Staff writer Michael A. Lindenberger contributed to this report.