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Indiana stimulus plan protects bridges funding

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INDIANAPOLIS -- The House approved a state stimulus package yesterday that supporters say could put more than 40,000 Hoosiers to work on highway projects, university construction and local infrastructure needs.

Among the provisions of House Bill 1656 is language added by Rep. Steve Stemler, D-Jeffersonville, to protect transportation money earmarked for the Ohio River bridges project.

The bill combines existing state dollars with federal money -- some from a yet-to-be passed congressional stimulus package -- to provide education grants to unemployed Hoosiers, to allocate money to ready-to-build university projects and to send \$1 billion to local governments for their projects.

That includes more than \$15 million to be divided among Clark County and its cities and towns, more than \$10 million for Floyd County and its cities and towns, and about \$5 million for Harrison County and its communities.

"People need help now," said Rep. Terri Austin, D-Anderson. "They need jobs."

The bill -- passed 88-11 -- now moves to the Senate, where majority Republicans are expected to make significant changes and could amend some of the provisions into the state budget. All area legislators voted for the bill.

In the Democrat-controlled House, HB 1656 was cobbled together from proposals offered by both parties.

Democrats wrote provisions that strip a state transportation trust fund of \$500 million -- nearly its entire balance -- to send to local governments for projects that would be completed in the next two years.

Austin said yesterday that the Major Moves Trust Fund, which was established after Gov. Mitch Daniels leased the Indiana Toll Road for 75 years to a foreign partnership, is barely earning any money and would be better used to put Hoosiers to work.

Democrats added language that would require contractors on state projects to use Indiana steel and Hoosier workers for nearly every position.

And Republicans added provisions that send even more money to local governments and make unemployed Hoosiers eligible for grants of up to \$3,000 for two years to be used at any two- or four-year college.

Their amendment would also create a Community Infrastructure Assistance Program to help local governments with the technical and engineering expertise needed to qualify for and use stimulus money.

"It puts the road trades -- from the ditch digger to the engineer -- to work immediately," said House

Minority Leader Brian Bosma, R-Indianapolis. "It puts our engineering firms and consulting firms to work immediately to access the money that one way or another is going to be coming from Washington, D.C."

Despite the GOP input, however, some Republicans said they couldn't support the measure because it stripped the trust fund, something they said lawmakers pledged wouldn't happen when they approved the toll road lease.

"I made a promise to people all throughout this state," said Rep. Randy Borrer, R-Fort Wayne, who was an author of Major Moves. "I'm not going to go back on that promise."

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