

New group scrutinizes stimulus spending, transportation priorities

■ Coalition also questions 'shovel-ready' restrictions

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Maryland needs to get on track with investing stimulus dollars in transportation, according to a newly formed coalition of smart growth, business, environmental and faith groups.

The group, Transportation for Maryland, released a report Monday analyzing how states have spent the federal aid in the first four months.

Transportation for Maryland is a member of the national coalition of Smart Growth America, which released the report through its state partners on the 120th day since the passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

The local organization's members include 1000 Friends of Maryland, the Central Maryland Transportation Alliance, the Maryland League of Conservation Voters and the Greater Baltimore Committee.

Transportation for Maryland members praised the state for investing 94 percent of the more than \$431 million in transportation stimulus funds it received in preserving the existing highway system.

Maryland spent most of its money on repairs and maintenance "and didn't fall into the trap of new capacity," said Dru Schmidt-Perkins, executive director of 1000 Friends of Maryland.

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The national average for investing in existing highways was 63 percent.

"But the stimulus spending also shows flaws in how we plan for and prioritize our transportation projects," Schmidt-Perkins said.

Many major new projects could not be funded using stimulus dollars, because they were not "shovel ready." That included transit projects such as the Purple Line connecting Bethesda to New Carrollton, the Red Line in Baltimore and the expansion of MARC commuter train service and intersection improvements needed under the military's Base Realignment and Closure plan.

Schmidt-Perkins called on Maryland to "seek transformative dollars and jump-start these critical projects."

That includes competing for grants included in the stimulus bill.

One pot of grant money is for high-speed rail and could be used to improve Amtrak, which Schmidt-Perkins called a "stunning resource of the East Coast that has been underfunded and under-maintained and has not been used as it could be."

Maryland's congressional delegation would have to partner with those of other East Coast states to compete with other regions for the funds. The money would provide a more long-term funding stream than the baseline stimulus dollars, which expire in June 2011.

