

Rep. Baca warns of missing out on federal stimulus funds

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By Duane Gang

SAN BERNARDINO - Inland officials must decide upon a list of projects that could move forward immediately or risk losing federal stimulus money to better-organized areas of the state, Rep. Joe Baca warned Monday.



Rep. Joe Baca

"If not, we are going to be left out standing on the sidelines," said Baca, D-Rialto. "If we don't come together, we are going to see more empty buildings."

Baca has pushed for weeks for a regional approach to securing a second meeting with local leaders on Monday. He said the regional projects -- from roads to clean energy -- that will create the most jobs.

Rep. Joe Baca told area officials Monday the region must focus on projects that create the most jobs.

He said the region must find a mechanism to secure funding. He suggested the Green Valley Initiative, the Corona-based private-public group launched in 2007 to foster the growth of green jobs in the two-county region.

More than 50 people -- most from local governments and labor unions -- attended the event held at the headquarters of the San Bernardino County Public Employees Association.

Baca said the Inland region must decide which projects are ready to move ahead now and which ones will create jobs both in the short and long term. He said he didn't know which projects those are, but wanted to ensure that Los Angeles County and the Bay Area don't beat the Inland area out for funding.

But bringing a diverse group of leaders together to decide which programs to lobby for funding could prove difficult.

Although agreeing on a regional approach, mayors from five San Bernardino County cities each suggested different priorities.

Fontana Mayor Mark Nuaimi said a promising aspect of any federal stimulus is help for local governments in securing bonds.

Rialto Mayor Grace Vargas suggested seeking funds to complete road projects, such as a new Riverside Avenue interchange on Interstate 10, that already are under way.

Redlands Mayor Jon Harrison said the focus should be on energy efficiency.

"There is an opportunity to create a full spectrum of jobs and create a new green economy of jobs," Harrison said.

Colton Mayor Kelly Chastain said a federal stimulus package should look at streamlining environmental mandates to help move projects forward more quickly.

Yucaipa Mayor Dick Riddell said, "I wouldn't minimize the importance of the local, parochial projects."

He said many cities have those projects ready to go and could put people to work within weeks.

Cities could still attempt to secure funding for smaller projects, Baca said.

"But we have to go beyond that, too," Baca said in an interview.

"If we come together for the sake of unity ... we can put that team together," he said.

Baca voted last week for the House version of the stimulus package, which now heads to the Senate this week for debate. The \$819 billion legislation aims to create or save as many as 4 million jobs through a combination of \$275 billion in tax cuts and about \$545 billion in an array of projects and state aid.

Reach Duane W. Gang at 951-368-9547 or dgang@PE.com