

Tracking Stimulus Money Locally

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While the benefits of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), a.k.a. the stimulus package, are being debated in Congress and around the country, for one city agency, that money has helped push forward important projects that would otherwise be left untouched for years.

The Charlottesville Redevelopment Housing Authority (CRHA) has been awarded close to \$800,000 in stimulus funds.

“Our needs far outweigh the money on a given year, and so a lot of the things get pushed off to a future year,” says Randy Bickers, CRHA’s executive director. “Some of these problems would obviously be on our list and were on our list, but would have taken us several more years, four or five years to get to them, given more pressing needs.”

An estimated \$250,000 of that money will be used to replace all of the windows at Crescent Hall, a public housing site on the corner of South First Street and Monticello Avenue, with energy efficient ones.

“That’s a big one,” says Bickers.

Based on the results of an energy audit, Bickers says that several items still need to be upgraded in the sites’ units: e.g. light bulbs and insulation. But that’s not all. The money will help remediate mold problems due to unreported water damage in a single home on Hinton Avenue in addition to replacing sub flooring and cabinets.

“We did a power wash and repainted the buildings at Westhaven and that’s now complete,” says Bickers. CRHA also put new weather stripping on exterior doors and “did some very minor playground renovations.”

For the skeptics of the stimulus package out there, the federal government has created an official website that provides access to tracking the money and you can track it by zipcode, by congressional district, by federal or state agency.

According to Recovery.gov, the Fifth District, the largest in the Commonwealth, was awarded close to \$200 million (reported by recipients as of October 31). As a state, Virginia was awarded \$3.4 billion.

The \$787 billion bill was signed into law by President Barack Obama last February in an attempt to jump-start a staggering economy and create jobs. Bickers says that securing jobs for local public housing residents has been a challenge. “So far in these projects, [contractors] haven’t had to hire anybody additional and their staff has already been in place to do what they needed to do.”

For Linda Rayner of the Community Energy Conservation Program, stimulus money—\$2.9 million for weatherization of homes for several localities—has helped hire new workers, but it hasn’t been without hiccups. “We weren’t quite prepared for all the paperwork that we had to do,” she says, adding that there was some major miscommunication with constituents on how the money will be used. “It’s nice to have this boost of money that we had, and if the plan is to keep people employed, that has worked,” she says.

All in all, the City of Charlottesville was awarded about \$5.8 million—so far—distributed among different departments: e.g. education, law enforcement and social services, among others, and \$3.1 million awarded through partnerships with the Department of Energy among others. Albemarle County was awarded around \$100,000 for supporting crime prevention and around \$400,000 for energy conservation.

At UVA, researchers have been awarded \$58.3 million in grants, more than all other public universities in the state. Since February, UVA has submitted 533 proposals for funding, and reports that 137 projects have been funded via several federal agencies such as the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation and the Department of Energy and Department of Defense.

Transportation projects funded for the Albemarle and Charlottesville area include the paving of sections of various routes including Rte. 250, Rte. 33, Rte. 29N and 29S, among others.

The funds will also be used for the widening of the I-64 westbound exit ramp at Fifth Street, a state project that will be advertised this month, and the widening of the I-64 eastbound exit ramp at 250 near Shadwell, which is currently in its final approval process for advertisement.