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Military projects are popular part of stimulus

By Rick Maze - Staff writer

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The \$12.8 billion in military and veterans construction programs included in an \$825 billion economic recovery package unveiled Jan. 15 may be one of the few areas of bipartisan agreement in the bill.

The construction money — \$1 billion for veterans hospitals and cemeteries, \$7.5 billion in new military construction and \$4.5 billion to improve existing facilities — is part of an economic stimulus plan that aims to create jobs, cut taxes by about \$275 billion, and add benefits and health care for the unemployed.

The bill represents an agreement between the incoming Obama administration and House Democratic leaders.

Specific projects are not named, in part to avoid complaints about lawmakers funding pet projects and in part to make sure the money is spent quickly. Instead, the Defense Department and Department of Veterans Affairs would decide where the money would go, based on estimates of what projects are ready to begin, according to House aides involved in preparing the bill.

The 258-page American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 is the top priority for Democrats.

The House Appropriations Committee planned to vote on the bill as early as Wednesday, and Democratic leaders want it to come to a vote in the full House in two weeks or less.

That plan sounds ambitious, given the sharp criticism leveled by the House Republican leader, Rep. John Boehner of Ohio, who complained that the package was developed “with no Republican input and appears to be grounded in the flawed notion that we can simply borrow and spend our way back to prosperity. What we’re seeing is disappointing.”

However, the idea of using construction projects to increase jobs has bipartisan support.

The Senate National Guard Caucus, headed by Sens. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Christopher Bond, R-Mo., wants Guard-related construction projects added to the stimulus bill.

In a Jan. 13 letter to Senate leaders, they asked for \$1.5 billion in construction and renovation money, noting that a backlog of projects is ready to be launched that would provide jobs, income for communities and improved Guard readiness.

The House proposal, as it stands, sets aside a much more modest \$140 million for the Army Guard and \$70 million for the Air Guard for new construction. But some of the \$4.5 billion to improve existing facilities could end up helping the Guard.

Rep. Steve Buyer, R-Ind., had pushed House leaders and President-elect Obama to consider adding money for veterans health care facilities and cemeteries to the bill to create jobs, while also helping veterans and their families.

Buyer said he is pleased the House bill goes along with the idea, but he noted that it omits another of his ideas — to increase money for small-business loans to veterans, which he believes would help with economic recovery.

Of the proposed \$1 billion for VA construction, \$950 million would be for medical facilities and \$50 million for cemeteries. Cemetery funding is intended for repairs to monuments and memorials, not for expansion. Money for medical facilities would help reduce a \$5 billion maintenance backlog, according to a report accompanying the bill.

Of the \$4.5 billion for renovation and modernization on military bases, \$1.8 billion is earmarked for projects related to energy efficiency, \$455 million for repairs and renovations to stateside medical facilities, \$154 million for barracks renovation and \$2.1 million to reduce a long-standing maintenance backlog.

An additional \$350 million would go to defense-related emergency research facilities.

For new construction, the Army would get \$820 million for barracks and \$100 million for child care centers. The appropriations committee report notes that the Army needs \$10 billion for barracks construction because it has a deficit of more than 147,700 barracks spaces for full-time troops and 109,400 for recruits.

The Navy and Marine Corps would get \$350 million for construction of housing and child care centers, and the Air Force would get \$280 million.

Hospital construction accounts for \$3.7 billion of the money, which also addresses a backlog.

Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Texas, who heads the House subcommittee responsible for military and veterans construction, said the highest priority was given to military hospitals because they are long overdue for improvements. It isn’t right, he said, that troops and their families are being treated at 50-year-old hospitals in need of repair and updating.

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