

Transit budget sticks to the basics

State's \$2.6 billion proposal stresses maintenance over new highway and rail projects

BY JOE MALINCONICO
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Emphasizing basic work like rebuilding railroad tracks and repaving highways, transportation officials yesterday outlined their plans for spending \$2.6 billion on New Jersey's roads and mass transit systems.

In contrast to the 1990s, when state officials highlighted new road and rail projects, the capital budget for the upcoming fiscal year primarily focuses on fixing the existing infrastructure.

The plan provides \$290 million for repairing 76 bridges, including the aging spans that carry Route 1&9 over the Elizabeth and Rahway rivers in Union County. There is another \$183 million for rebuilding highways, including sections of Route 78 in Hunterdon County.

Meanwhile, rail commuters are getting another \$222 million for fixing drawbridges and replacing 13 miles of train tracks and 53,000 railroad ties. Also, the budget allocates \$172 million for purchasing new locomotives and passenger cars.

Officials said about 4 percent of the money will be used to expand highways, compared with 20 percent in previous years.

"Preserving roads and bridges may not be glamorous, but it gets the job done and it keeps our economy going," said Transportation Commissioner Jack Lettiere.

NJ Transit Executive Director George Warrington said his agency no longer can afford to promise "a railroad in everybody's town."

"We have to be realistic and manage our expectations," Warrington said.

Some of the biggest allocations are for the light rail systems in the state. That includes \$115 million for extending the trolley system in Hudson County, \$48 million for the light rail line being built to connect Camden and Trenton and \$22 million for extending the Newark subway from Penn Station to Broad Street Station.

The Transportation Department's capital budget, which uses federal and state money, is about the same size as last year's. About 51 percent of the money is being spent on roads and 49 percent on mass transit.

Officials yesterday warned they will have to find new sources of revenue to keep pace with the state's transportation needs in the future.

Some experts have urged the state to increase its gasoline tax by as much as 10 cents per gallon to provide the revenue that is needed. The McGreevey administration has created a commission to resolve the funding issues.

The plan unveiled yesterday drew praise from a variety of transportation interest groups and watchdogs.

"It seems New Jersey is putting more money into road and bridge preservation, which is a good sign," said Kate Slevin, spokeswoman for the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, which harshly criticized state spending policies in previous years. "And they're spending less on widening highways or building new ones, which is also good."

"The bridge work is significant," said Phil Beachem, president of the New Jersey Alliance for Action, which is composed of labor unions, contractors and businesses. "A lot of these bridges were built right after World War II. They were built to 1945 standards that are not designed for today's traffic volumes."

For the most part, the budget outlined yesterday has been a work in progress for several years. All of the projects getting money already are in various stages of planning or construction.

A few jobs were put off for another year, including improvements to Route 46 where it crosses the Rockaway River in Morris County. But none was scrapped altogether.

Officials acknowledged that the budget keeps in place some spending practices that have come under fire.

For example, NJ Transit will use about \$260 million that is supposed to be used for big projects to cover basic operating expenses instead.

"Some years, they paid for snow removal from the capital budget; hopefully, that won't happen this year," said Dianne Brake, president of the Regional Planning Partnership. "Considering what they have to work with, I think they're striking the right balance in this year's budget."

Joe Malinconico covers transportation. He can be reached at jmalinconico@starledger.com and (973) 392-4230.