

## TRANSPORTATION:

### **As states scramble to adapt, DOT pledges \$13M in first of many likely cash infusions** *(Wednesday, October 31, 2012)*

**Eugene Mulero and Julia Pyper, E&E reporters**

In response to a hurricane that severely damaged large parts of the Northeast, the Department of Transportation yesterday announced grants for two states to help restore widely used commuter train and subway lines -- the first in a series of aid packages it expects to provide in the coming days.

The department's Federal Highway Administration emergency relief grants for New York and Rhode Island, \$10 million and \$3 million, respectively, are aimed at assisting state officials helping residents stranded or without power get around their communities. DOT officials said they expect other states, such as New Jersey, to request emergency aid shortly, as the region's transportation system -- particularly its transit lines -- continues to be crippled by Hurricane Sandy.

"President Obama has directed us to immediately help restore vital transportation infrastructure following this unprecedented and devastating storm," Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said.

The massive storm damaged or destroyed many transit lines around the tri-state area, paralyzing most of New York City's transit system and leaving millions without power. Obama declared New York and New Jersey major disaster areas and plans to tour New Jersey's coastline today with Gov. Chris Christie (R). Obama also declared states of emergency in Virginia, Maryland, West Virginia, Delaware, Connecticut and Massachusetts.

During a news conference yesterday, Christie said he was shocked by the damage. He said state highway crews found industrial train cars washed up along the New Jersey Turnpike, which is a section of Interstate 95. Also, many of the commuter trains along the Jersey Shore that arrive at New York's Pennsylvania Station were shut down as of press time, raising concerns about the resilience of the state's transit system. The station for the PATH commuter rail in Hoboken, N.J., was also shut down after floodwaters from the Hudson River rushed through the elevator systems.

"This prudent and necessary action will enable NJ Transit to further support our state's response to Hurricane Sandy, freeing up resources that may be needed to further facilitate hurricane relief," New Jersey Department of Transportation Commissioner James Simpson said during a radio interview.

The Big Apple was hit very hard as well. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority halted service on its 108-year-old subway system, and the commuter lines connecting Hudson County, N.J., and Manhattan were shut down due to the massive flooding. MTA Chairman Joseph Lhota told reporters yesterday that he has "never

faced a disaster as devastating as what we experienced last night. Hurricane Sandy wreaked havoc on our entire transportation system."

While airlines are reportedly starting to send flights again into New York, officials warned that with subway and commuter rail service not active and spotty access to bridges and tunnels, many workers will not be able to get to their jobs, and many travelers will be stuck. The travel industry expects to lose access to tourist hot spots in the tri-state area until crews can repair transit lines.

In the nation's capital, the sometimes problematic Metro transit system appeared to be operating smoothly today after shutting down for almost 48 hours. Limited service had resumed yesterday afternoon. While thousands are still without power in greater Washington, D.C., officials say the area should be back and running in a few days. Overall, they said, Sandy was not as bad as the debilitating series of snowstorms more than two years earlier.

## **Planning ahead**

For the most part, state transportation agencies have been taking steps in recent years to better prepare their transportation networks for severe weather events, according to Cynthia Burbank, vice president of Parsons Brinckerhoff, a consulting and engineering firm.

Some states have carried out vulnerability and risk assessments to determine which facilities are top priorities during storm surges. They've also developed better emergency response plans and identified changes in transportation maintenance and operations to reduce damage.

"States are looking at what they can do ahead of time in order to respond quickly," Burbank said. "Like stockpiling the types of materials and equipment they need to respond, such as extra traffic signals or barricades or mobile electronic signs, and repositioning them so they're in the locations that are going to be impacted."

In Maryland, state emergency management agencies used the geographic data mapping system Osprey this week to track hazard-related information. The program includes historical data on traffic and road closures collected by the Maryland State Highway Administration (MDSHA) to help improve the storm response.

"What this did was give another data set [to] our decision makers during the emergency situation," Gregory Slater, director of the Office of Planning and Preliminary Engineering at MDSHA, wrote in an email.

Going forward, transportation agencies may also look at designing new transportation structures, such as bridges and roadways, based on future climate scenarios in addition to historical data. Time will tell whether other types of preparation measures paid off during the course of Hurricane Sandy.

"Preventative action is a lot cheaper than paying after the fact. So the question is, will we make these needed investments?" said Steve Winkelman, director of the Center for Clean Air Policy's transportation and adaptation program. "Sometimes you need to spend more, and sometimes it's just spending slightly differently."

In New York City, the new Second Avenue subway line is being built to 100-year floodplain standards, which could help mitigate damage in the future. According to the Multihazard Mitigation Council, every \$1 spent on

hazard mitigation can save society \$4 in the future.

"I think the lessons [from Sandy] are that we need to plan ahead to protect critical infrastructure now to minimize economic losses and bounce back more quickly," Winkelman said, adding: "Resilience needs to become the new normal."

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