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The biggest bang for the buck

President-elect Obama is already in Washington and negotiating a major economic stimulus package with the newly-sworn in Congress. Relief for Pennsylvania's citizens, economy and environment could be coming very soon. But will the stimulus package really give us the biggest bang for the buck, or will it be a victim of pork barrel politics, and stimulate the exact problems we're trying solve? We'll soon know.

If the package is as Obama has outlined, it will be right on the money. The promises are many: to build a sustainable economic future that strengthens cities and older suburbs; giving relief to Main Street and to individual homeowners who are facing foreclosure; investing in energy efficiency; preserving our natural resources and heritage; fixing our aging roads, bridges and water and sewer systems; building the smart grid; and investing in people, education and good paying jobs.

A stimulus package mirroring these principles is vital for everyone in the nation, especially Pennsylvania and the rest of the Rust Belt. The investments made here will safeguard our nation's history and its earliest settlements and cities. And the right investments will restore and repair our state, once the leader in the vital industries that built our nation and won the World Wars. The package could help ameliorate the decline of the past few decades, when our nation's investments followed the manufacturing companies that fled with their jobs to the south and west.

Investing in fixing what we have before building new is a smart move anytime, but particularly right now. Whether the issue is fixing roads, sewers or housing, study after study shows that repairing our aging infrastructure returns more money to the local community, and creates more great paying jobs. Clearly, fixing it first is a giant bang for the buck.

Similarly, linking housing to public transportation is another big bang for the buck. It helps the environment, by cutting long commutes in one-occupant vehicles, and matches the demographic trends showing that people increasingly want to live in walkable communities that are close to public transit. Until now, federal transportation funds have gone disproportionately to highways rather than public transit. Changing that formula and linking transportation funding to housing improvements will make our scarce dollars go

much further. And this strategy also helps combat the soot and global warming pollution caused by cars and trucks.

Changing how we use energy is also a winning strategy. Pollution from energy use, especially electricity, is the largest single environmental problem we have to solve, and we won't solve it by building more polluting power plants. The average Pennsylvania family is paying 25 percent of its after tax income for energy use (with low income Pennsylvanians paying up to 54 percent), including lighting and heating their homes and transportation. But too much of that energy is wasted. Investing in robust energy efficiency programs is the fastest and cheapest way to cut energy use, put more money in the pockets of Pennsylvanians and protect public health and the environment

Across the state, we are faced with the problems caused by our aging sewer systems, which are incapable of handling our current and future clean water needs. Too often, overwhelmed sewer systems dump or leak untreated sewage into our rivers and streams, creating serious health problems for those living near those waters, and making the task of delivering clean water to our households and businesses harder and more expensive. Investing in fixing and upgrading these systems not only will make Pennsylvania a more attractive place to live work and play, but it will also create tens of thousands of jobs.

Helping workers make the transition to the new job markets is another winning strategy. When Pennsylvania's manufacturing base collapsed in the late 1900s, funding was developed so that displaced workers were able to find training in new industries, often through the state's network of community colleges. Steelworkers became x-ray technicians and nurses, helping to fuel our state's leadership in health care delivery and research. Retraining workers for 21st Century jobs is yet another giant bang for the buck.

There's no doubt that passing the stimulus will be difficult, and we can expect the same old lobbyists to be urging Congress to fund the same old things. But business as usual won't get us out of this economic mess. Being smart, strategic and making sure our dollars go as far as possible to help our families and businesses is the only way to make a real difference. Pennsylvania needs the biggest possible bang for the buck.

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