

Thompson among those leading bipartisan call for rural funding in stimulus

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WASHINGTON — Congressman Mike Thompson (D-CA), Natural Resources Committee Chairman Nick Rahall (D-W.Va.), Science and Technology Committee Chairman Bart Gordon (D-Tenn.), and Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Bob Filner (D-CA), along with 29 of their colleagues, sent a letter to Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and Minority Leader John Boehner (R-OH) late Friday urging them to ensure that rural areas receive an equitable share of any economic stimulus package.

“People across this country are struggling to pay their mortgages and afford rising health care costs, but rural communities are being hit even harder by the tough economy,” said Congressman Thompson. “Congress must ensure that America’s rural areas receive their fair share of any economic stimulus package by investing in the highways, bridges, and other infrastructure that are the arteries of our country’s economy. America cannot be restored to greatness without the help of all Americans, not just those in urban areas.”

His colleagues also emphasized the importance of public-private partnerships and investing in rural infrastructure such as broadband and electric grids.

In the letter to Pelosi, they wrote, “As Congress continues to craft an economic stimulus package, it is critical that the benefits of any stimulus are broadly distributed throughout rural, urban, and suburban America.”

That’s because, according to the letter, approximately 50 million Americans live in rural communities.

“An economic stimulus package must recognize that rural Americans make vital contributions to our economy and face the same struggles with rising unemployment as people living in urban and suburban communities,” the members of Congress explained. “In fact, seasonally adjusted unemployment rates for non-metropolitan areas were higher each quarter in 2008 than for metropolitan areas.”

Thompson and his colleagues — all of them from rural districts — assured Pelosi of their support for her continued efforts to include infrastructure spending in a recovery package.

“However,” they said, “legislation with infrastructure spending that ultimately only funds projects in urban and suburban communities will fail to provide the broad economic benefit the American people expect. Facing rising unemployment, rural America cannot afford to be shortchanged in an economic recovery package.”

“As representatives of rural districts, we know that rural communities are prepared with ready-to-go infrastructure projects that could put people to work within months,” the members of Congress wrote. “Rural communities have the workforce and the infrastructure needs to effectively utilize new federal spending. Rural areas should be provided with an equitable share of economic stimulus funds to improve their local economies just like metropolitan communities.”

The Job Creation and Unemployment Relief Act of 2008, H.R. 7110, included a provision to distribute stimulus funds between rural and metropolitan communities.

The letter explained that funds in the Federal Transit Administration Transit Capital Assistance Grants were specifically reserved for rural formula grants.

The representatives said Congress should “build on the precedent created by the transit funds in the Job Creation and Unemployment Relief Act with guarantees in new economic recovery legislation to ensure an equitable distribution of all infrastructure funds between rural and metropolitan areas.”

In adding to Thompson, Rahall, Gordon and Filner, signatories to the letter included Reps. Joe Baca, John Barrow, Marion Berry, Dan Boren, Leonard Boswell, Shelley Moore Capito, Chris Carney, Ben Chandler, Travis Childers, Jim Costa, Jerry Costello, Henry Cuellar, Lincoln Davis, Bob Etheridge, Frank Kratovil Jr., Jim Marshall, Eric Massa, Jim Matheson, Charlie Melancon, Mike Michaud, Alan Mollohan, Collin Peterson, Mike Ross, John Salazar, Heath Shuler, Mike Simpson, John Tanner, Tim Walz and Peter Welch.

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