



INFRASTRUCTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Engineering firms could see more activity under President Biden's economic plans

BY MARTIN DAKS

Since January 2019, T&M Associates has been providing construction management and inspection services for the Grasselli Access Road Bridge, a \$13 million, 497-foot-long structure that's being built in Linden. If President Joe Biden's \$2 trillion



Cimino

infrastructure proposal is passed in some form, T&M Associates and other engineering firms could see a lot more work like this coming their way — and the Northeast region as a whole will be better off, according to John Cimino, chief strategy officer at the national engineering and technical services consulting company.

The Linden structure — which won an industry award in October — is designed to carry two lanes of vehicle traffic, a Conrail spur track, and a pedestrian sidewalk. Along with a new signalized intersection along congested Tremley Point Road, the bridge will offer quick access to the planned Linden Logistics Center, a former brownfield site that will house eight warehouses totaling 4.1 million square feet.

"The president's proposed infrastructure plan displays an understanding of the need for infrastructure maintenance and upgrades, particularly for the

transportation, water and sewerage facilities in the Northeast region," Cimino noted. "T&M Associates and other engineering firms are known as trusted advisers to their clients, and as funding is made available for necessary local, county, state and bistrate projects, authorities will look for trusted companies to provide consulting, design and other services."

ROADWAYS, BRIDGES, OTHER PROJECTS

In New Jersey, where the permitting process alone can take a year or more to complete, "major roadways like the Turnpike and the Garden State Parkway have benefited from maintenance and upgrades," he added. "But many county and municipal roadways, including bridges and culverts [tunnels that funnel a stream or open drain under a road or railroad], are functionally obsolete and it will take significant funding to upgrade them."

New Jersey previously upped the state's fuel tax and tolls to help pay for roadway improvements, noted Cimino. "But we'll need federal help to finish the job. I remember driving South on the New Jersey Turnpike and sitting in traffic jams from Exit 8a [Jamesburg-Cranbury] to Exit 7 [Bordentown-Trenton] because the roadway funneled from six lanes to three after the New Brunswick exit. That issue was eventually addressed, but there's still a lot to be done."

Other experts agree also think that engineering firms

may soon be on a roll. “There is widespread public support for infrastructure investment and that support transcends the political divide,” said Todd E. Vachon, faculty coordinator of the Labor Education Action Research Network in the School of Management and Labor Relations at Rutgers University. But there’s no guarantee that a high-price fix will be approved.



Vachon

A BIPARTISAN ISSUE

“Democratic and Republican voters alike acknowledge the need for repairing and updating our crumbling infrastructure,” he noted. “Congress is another story. Neither party wants the other party to be able to claim credit for kicking off an infrastructure economic boom. One would think this would be a strong incentive for both parties to come together with strong bipartisan support for an infrastructure package. Unfortunately, the politics are messy and no one party has the necessary votes to pass such legislation in the traditional manner unless they either eliminate the filibuster or go a different avenue, such as the budget reconciliation process, to get the spending bill approved.”

If some sort of infrastructure initiative is passed, it would be good news for New Jer-

sey, he added. “Like most states, New Jersey has no shortage of crumbling infrastructure in need of repair, and ideas for new infrastructure projects to modernize the state’s economy abound,” Vachon said. “Some projects that could come to light under the Biden infrastructure plan include the stalled Gateway Program and its plan to build two new Hudson River rail tunnels into New York City, and rehabilitate the existing 111-year-old ones that are showing signs of rapid decay.”

Additional transportation-related projects could include “the construction of a

fourth track in Newark leading to the tunnels, the creation of a new New Jersey rail yard, the construction of the Bergen Loop in Secaucus for west-of-Hudson train riders, replacement of the Portal North and Sawtooth bridges, construction of a new Portal South Bridge to increase the corridor’s rail capacity, and massive investment into highways, roads and bridges,” he added. “New Jersey has 502 bridges that are considered structurally deficient.”

Some projects could also help to promote social and environmental justice, he noted, “including the replacement of old lead wa-

ter pipes in our cities, both within housing as well as under the streets and buildings. There are an estimated 173,000 lead service lines, according to the state Department of Environmental Protection. Expansion to broadband internet access could help to reduce the digital divide, both between suburban and rural and between suburban and urban. The COVID pandemic and resultant school closures and stay-at-home orders revealed just how big the gap in access was across groups of residents in the Garden State.”

Will infrastructure boost mean more union jobs?

Anytime the infrastructure gets upgraded — including roadways, bridges, water, wind, and solar — “dirt gets turned over, buildings, sewer lines and other projects are constructed, and our members play an important part,” said Greg Lavee, business manager of the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 825. “We’re proud, for example, that our members were part of the effort to switch out old lead pipes in Newark, so residents there can have access to cleaner water.”

His union has been on a “slow and steady growth path” for the past decade, and if Biden’s infrastructure gets passed, the trend is likely to accelerate, Lavee said. “We know that the [century-old] Portal Bridge replacement project will likely start by the end of this year, and I think there’s now a better chance that the [Gateway] Hudson tunnels program will become a reality.

President Biden is signaling that the federal government wants to be a partner in these kinds of projects, and there’s a lot that can be done in New Jersey and across the nation.”

Scott Campbell, president and business manager of IBEW Local 94, is also upbeat about the prospect of infrastructure improvements. Local 94 ratified a two-year contract extension with PSEG in October “and some pieces of President Biden’s proposal call for EV (electric vehicle) charging stations and wind and other infrastructure upgrades will mean more work for our members,” he noted.

“Any and all investment in infrastructure is good for construction workers,” observed Todd E. Vachon, faculty coordinator of the Labor Education Action Research Network, in the School of Management and Labor Relations at Rutgers University. “And

in a state like New Jersey, that means it’s good for unionized construction workers.”

Whether infrastructure investment would help unions in other industries “is an open question,” he added. “If the legislation includes new protections for the right to form unions, then I would anticipate a surge in unionization in sectors ranging from manufacturing to warehousing to trucking. Without such changes to labor law, the same barriers that currently exist will likely continue to keep the unionization rate artificially low. Increasing infrastructure investment will increase jobs, but how much it increases unionization will depend in part on other factors, particularly on whether it includes changes to labor law that allow for a more smooth path to unionization for workers seeking representation.”

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