

Stimulus slow to show gains
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GREENSBORO — Gene Brown extended a job offer on Thursday to someone he hopes will be a member of Housing Greensboro's tiny full-time staff.

This person would oversee the nonprofit's newest program — making minor repairs to the homes of the elderly or infirm.

It was a job Brown might not have been able to create if not for federal stimulus funding and other donations.

It's a small — but concrete — example of a new job created with the help of the \$700 billion-plus federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, signed by President Barack Obama a year ago last week.

Where's all that federal cash gone? And, perhaps more important, has it reached the wallets of Guilford County's 27,000 unemployed?

Signs of the stimulus package's effectiveness, or lack thereof, in Greensboro have been difficult to decipher.

In many cases, local projects haven't gotten off the ground. The economy likely will get a boost. It's just taking longer than federal leaders predicted.

"It's starting to, but the big stuff for us, and I guess for a lot of folks, is still coming," said Dan Curry, acting director of Greensboro Housing and Community Development.

"But," he said, "we don't have hardly any of the money in hand yet."

The stimulus act has funded a range of programs, such as new trains and extended unemployment benefits. All were meant to boost the slumping economy and get Americans back to work.

The Obama administration says the recovery act has created or saved about 2 million jobs in the past year. But that figure might not be accurate, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

As of the end of September, projects funded under the stimulus bill had created or saved 640,000 jobs, the budget office said.

Up-to-date numbers are not yet available. But more folks are out of work locally and nationally every month.

In Greensboro, the city has drawn in about \$23 million under the stimulus bill.

How many jobs has that created or saved? A grand total of 6.9, according to city accounting. Why so little to show for so much money?

For one, tracking jobs created is complicated. Federal tracking requirements require the city to calculate how many "full-time equivalent" jobs were created. For instance, the city staff says that 22 people put to work part-time preparing a construction site last July is the full-time equivalent of 2.34 jobs created or saved.

"You count pieces of jobs and you put them together," Curry said. "Whatever that ends up being, that is what you report."

Then there is the more obvious issue: Money from the federal government isn't that easy to spend quickly.

Some of the projects thought to have the quickest and most direct job impact were in construction. Yet the Greensboro construction projects — accounting for \$12 million in stimulus money — have not gotten off the ground yet, as the city works to comply with all the act's requirements.

The City Council recently signed off on some of the funds to be paid to the Raleigh-based J.M. Thompson Company to build the new Greensboro Transit Authority maintenance facility.

That might save or create some local jobs among the subcontractors whom they plan to hire for tasks such as the plumbing and electrical work.

"Anytime you can start a construction project in the middle of a recession, it stimulates the economy," City Councilman Robbie Perkins said.

But J.M. Thompson won't hire anybody until the paperwork goes through, and the money starts flowing.

Other projects also are in the pipeline, including a variety of community renovation projects, but they won't count as new jobs until they start.

The stimulus act has helped in other ways.

"If you think about what we've actually spent versus received, the real spending has been through the Workforce Development grants," Assistant City Manager Denise Turner said.

Hundreds of local young people were put to work through a stimulus-funded Workforce Development Board program over the summer. The board also hired full-time, seasonal workers to run those programs and others.

And there was that bright spot in the job arena over at Housing Greensboro.

The burgeoning nonprofit has received more than \$100,000 in stimulus funds to put toward renovations on local homes.

Although much of the work will be done by volunteers, the increased workload means director Brown will need a new person to fill out his staff of four full-time, one part-time and two Americorps staff members.

"It's almost like it's providing dual benefits," Brown said. "It's creating a job and in our case ... we're serving those in the community with these home repairs."

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