

Commerce Still Silent on Specifics of \$150M ‘Infrastructure’ Program



S.C. Department of Commerce officials remain tight-lipped about details of a proposed \$150 million “infrastructure” program, which Gov. Henry McMaster included in his state budget version for next fiscal year.

On Thursday, Commerce released records to The Nerve under the S.C. Freedom of Information Act, but the relatively few documents gave no specifics about how the money would be spent.

The Nerve on Dec. 10 first [revealed](#) that Commerce was seeking \$100 million out of state surplus funds for the “Strategic Economic Development Infrastructure” program – listing it as its top budget priority for the fiscal year that starts July 1, according to the agency’s initial budget request submitted to the state Department of Administration.

At the time, Commerce didn’t respond to written questions about the program, so The Nerve submitted a formal records request under the Freedom of Information Act.

Earlier this month, The Nerve [revealed](#) that McMaster was seeking \$50 million more for the program than what Commerce initially requested as part of his proposed \$36 billion total state budget for fiscal 2022-23. But, as with his Cabinet agency’s initial request, the governor’s state spending plan contained no details on the program, and following Commerce’s practice, his office didn’t respond to The Nerve’s written questions.

As The Nerve reported then, the \$150 million would come from state surplus dollars, bringing Commerce’s total fiscal 2022-23 budget to more than \$333 million – about \$173.5 million more than its current approximately \$159.6 million budget.

Commerce Still Silent on Specifics of \$150M 'Infrastructure' Program

For the \$150 million into some perspective, it's more than the current entire budgets of at least 50 state agencies.
Published: Monday, 9 January 2022 09:20
By Rick Brundrett - The Nerve

Hits: 1094

McMaster in June appointed Harry Lightsey, who formerly worked for AT&T and General Motors, as the new Commerce secretary, replacing longtime agency head Bobby Hitt, who retired. Lightsey's annual salary is \$252,000, according to the state salary database.

In a Dec. 6 email to Mark Hendrick, Commerce's director of governmental affairs, Chris Huffman, the agency's chief financial officer, included a draft of the revised \$150 million budget request, which noted there are "several significant infrastructure-related projects from the prior Secretary's tenure," adding those projects "account for approximately \$70 million of this total request," and that "increases in construction costs for 2022 and 2023 are expected to increase this amount."

That email, however, contained no details on those projects.

The Nerve on Thursday afternoon asked Commerce about specifics of the \$70 million in projects cited in Huffman's email – and why records related to that were not released with the other documents requested last month under the Freedom of Information Act. No response was given by publication of this story.

In another email on Nov. 30 to the Department of Administration, Huffman said Commerce was "requesting the ability to increase priority #1 – Strategic Economic Development Infrastructure – Non-Recurring Funding from \$100,000,000 to \$150,000,000." That email, though, contained no specifics on the projects to be funded with the \$150 million.

The Department of Administration's website includes Commerce's revised 2022-23 budget request, dated Dec. 14. The amended request, which doesn't reveal any details about the infrastructure program though listing it as the top budget priority, was included in the records released Thursday by Commerce to The Nerve, besides the agency's initial request.

The vague language in the initial budget request was repeated in the revised proposal. For example, both requests contend that the state's "ability to build strategic economic infrastructure independent of specific projects and supported by an appropriate funding mechanism is paramount to the state's ability to remain competitive."

Among other records released Thursday to The Nerve was a PowerPoint budget presentation to the House Ways and Means Committee last May 25, which included a \$50 million request in non-recurring funds for "Economic Development Infrastructure."

"This is the time for S.C. to utilize our surplus or pending American Rescue Plan dollars to prepare our communities for future economic success," according to the document, referring in part to President Joe Biden's coronavirus-relief funding plan.

Commerce Still Silent on Specifics of \$150M 'Infrastructure' Program

Published: Monday, 31 January 2022 09:29
By Rick Brundrett - The Nerve
Hits: 1094

The Nerve's Dec. 13 open-records request to Commerce specified all "reports, memos, emails, letters and any other records" related to the proposed infrastructure program.

Brundrett is the news editor of The Nerve (www.thenerve.org). Contact him at 803-254-4411 or rick@thenerve.org. Follow him on Twitter @RickBrundrett. Follow The Nerve on Facebook and Twitter @thenervesc.