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News

60 per cent of PPP funding for roads

FRANK McDONALD

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ANALYSIS:Varadkar says a decision to advance projects to the end of their existing phases has paid off

LESS THAN a year ago, Minister for Transport Leo Varadkar ordered the National Roads Authority to “rein in spending on planning and preparatory works” for a large number of road schemes because of cutbacks.

Yesterday, he was able to announce that the motorway budget was being “effectively restored” by the stimulus package. So have public-private partnership (PPP) projects for “school bundles”, under which 12 mainly post-primary schools will be built in counties Clare, Cork, Kildare, Louth and Tipperary. As has the long-stalled plan by Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) to relocate to the extensive former Grangegorman hospital site in the north inner city.

Varadkar’s decision last year to opt for the city centre link between Dublin’s two Luas lines means that the new DIT campus at Grangegorman would be served by the line to Broombridge in Cabra. The two that fell at the Minister’s fence were Metro North and Dart Underground.

There was a big problem with PPP projects. Prospective private sector partners were finding it difficult, if not impossible, to raise funding for projects in Ireland because of the country’s debt crisis. As a result, many projects (notably road schemes and “school bundles”) had to be shelved as the State was in no position to plug the funding gap.

“Based on current plans, no new roads project will be commenced in 2012, 2013 or 2014,” a spokesman for the Minister said last August. But Varadkar yesterday attributed the fact that a number of projects were now ready to proceed to his “pragmatic decision” at the time to “advance each project to the end of its existing phase”.

Thus, “more than 60 per cent of the stimulus funding allocated specifically to PPPs is going on road projects”, he said. The most significant of these is the N17-N18 Gort-Tuam route which has a strategic value under the National Spatial Strategy, in linking Galway with Shannon Airport.

The M11 Gorey-Enniscorthy route will bypass Enniscorthy, which the existing N11 failed to do. Another sub-standard section of this road, between Arklow and Rathnew, is to be replaced by a dual-carriageway running from the Arklow Bypass and the Ashford-Rathnew bypass under the current capital programme.

But the N25 New Ross bypass has been described by James Nix, Ireland co-ordinator of the Brussels-based Transport Environment lobby group, as “largely a vanity project” involving a 15km motorway with a “gargantuan span of a bridge” over the river Barrow, ignoring a long-established road reservation.

“The project never added up, even at the height of the boom, and still doesn’t,” he said.

Indeed, in other cases – notably the M9 Dublin-Waterford route, the M3 from Blanchardstown to north of Kells, Co Meath, and the Limerick Tunnel – the PPP partners are being compensated for the fact that traffic is well below predicted levels.

Regarding public transport, An Bord Pleanála has yet to make a railway order for the Luas city centre link extending to Broombridge but “all going well, we hope to start construction work in the near future”, Varadkar’s statement noted.

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