

Yeah, But Did You Live During The Great Depression?

The recent passage of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) has sent governors and state legislators into a flurry of activity. Except for a few Republican governors who have voiced opposition to the plan, just about everyone is trying to find out how to access this new cash stream and how much they can get.

Delaware is expected to receive roughly \$1.57 billion from the plan. This includes an estimated \$965 million in direct spending and around \$621 million in tax relief for state residents. While not a “jobs program,” President Obama has made it clear that he intends for the plan to spark private-sector growth. Keynes tells us that if the private sector isn’t giving us demand, then the public sector must. That’s what President Obama is hoping to do with ARRA, not unlike what President Roosevelt did with his ambitious proposals in the early part of the 20th century.

The current national economic crisis has drawn incessant parallels to the Great Depression of the 1930s. While some of these comparisons are strained when considering the overwhelming depth of that crisis, there is little doubt that the current downturn is a once in a generation event. All of this considered, it might be useful to examine what a “stimulus plan” looked like for Delaware during the Great Depression. In some ways, we can see that the projects of the past are not unlike the projects we are seeing today.

In 1933, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was created. The CCC established conservation camps throughout the United States and employed unmarried men between the ages of 18 and 25. The projects undertaken by the CCC gave some real meaning to the term “shovel-ready projects.” In Delaware, “the CCC dug ditches in the many marshes to drain mosquito nests.”

The most well-known of the unemployment programs was the Works Project Administration (WPA), created in 1935. The WPA employed blue-collar workers to construct public works projects, but less commonly known are the white-collar jobs the program fostered. These jobs dealt with cultural projects like historical and government records’ surveys and oral histories. Many of Delaware’s WPA employees worked on these types of projects. One could view these types of projects as predecessors to the ARRA’s inclusion of funds to digitize medical records. They “surveyed historical records, transcribed church records, and listed tombstone inscriptions throughout the State.” Along with the Delaware Public Archives Commission, the Historical Records Survey managed the project, and the work “resulted in the publication of an invaluable archival research tool, the Inventory of the County Archives of Delaware; No. 1 New Castle County.” Surveys of Kent and Sussex Counties were begun but never completed, although all records contained in the work of the WPA can still be found in the State Archives.

While ARRA’s projects and funding mechanisms are a bit more sophisticated, nuanced, and (yes) complicated than those of Roosevelt’s day, we can see similarities. Let’s just be thankful that we are talking bridges and roadways and not mosquito-nest draining ditches...yet.

—by John Collins

Reference

Federal Unemployment Programs 1930-44, Delaware Public Archives, archives.delaware.gov/collections/aghist/0740.shtml