

# 'Mixed signals' roadblocks to projects

Officials: Moving targets must end in road projects

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**HAMILTON** — State lawmakers told Butler County leaders Monday they would have a better chance getting road funding if their priorities weren't constantly shuffling.

During a lunch meeting with the local legislative delegation, county commissioners Greg Jolivette and Charles Furmon said the county needs to make a better push for state funding for road projects.

"We need to take another run at the state for transportation

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funding," Jolivette said. "We've got enough here that we can say Butler County is the job engine. We've proven it in Ohio and we've proven it in the Midwest and transportation and these road projects are the key."

The lawmakers — which included state Sen.-elect Gary Cates and state Reps. Courtney Combs, Shawn Webster and Bill Colley — agreed, but said there have been problems.

"The priority on these projects has been a moving target and that's a problem," Webster said. "It's got to stop. No more moving targets."

He said the state once committed money to a project to improve and extend Ohio 63, but later had to shift that money to pay for interchange improvements in Middletown at Ohio 122.

In another instance, Cates said, when the Butler County Transportation Improvement District

shifted priorities from Liberty Interchange to the Bypass Ohio 4 widening project, he got a phone call from Ohio Department of Transportation Director Gordon Proctor.

"Proctor called me and asked me, 'What the hell is going on?'" Cates said. "You've got to admit, Butler County has sent mixed signals to Columbus."

John Fonner, director of the TID, said the group has been focused on the same projects since he arrived in May. Fonner said the board has been consistent. Because it chose to pursue state funding for the bypass project doesn't mean it slowed down on the interchange.

He said it's fair to ask for a priority given shrinking funds from the state and federal government, but it doesn't mean the county should give up on other transportation projects.

"It just means we need to be more creative when we're looking for funding sources," he said.

Combs said he believes the Ohio 129 regional highway and the Union Centre interchange are behind most of the job growth the county has experienced in the past five years. When those projects were organized, he said, the

entire county bought in and they remained the county's top priorities for years.

That needs to happen again for the lawmakers to make any head way with the transportation department, he said.

State transportation projects are funded according to the Transportation Review Advisory Council recommendations. The group, known as TRAC, scores projects according to several factors, including economic development potential.

Cates said it may be possible to lobby for heavier weighting of the job creation factor, but added that many counties in Ohio like the process the way it is.

"A lot of people like it," he said. "They say it's taken the politics

out of the process."

Jolivette assured the delegation that if it can work for the county, the county commission can organize support.

Colley said that if he's going to support a project, he needs to know that his constituents in West Chester Township, Liberty Township, Monroe and Middletown are behind it. County leaders, he said, should take care of that first before calling on their legislators.

"If you guarantee that all entities are in agreement and no one is going to change their minds six months later, we can work on it," Combs said.

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