

Liberty, I-75 deal moves ahead

Public hearings to come on JEDD

By Candice Brooks
and Chris Dumond
Butler County Bureau

LIBERTY TOWNSHIP — Officials from Mason, Middletown and Liberty Township say they're going forward with an earnings tax district to help fund construction of the Liberty Interchange in spite of threats from Butler County commissioners.

The three municipalities agreed to the terms of a proposed Joint Economic Development District Thursday that will now move forward into the public hearing process. Notices of the hearings could go out next week.

The JEDD would create a tax district in Liberty Township to raise as much as \$10 million per year toward the cost of building an interchange at Interstate 75 and Hamilton-Mason Road, and other nearby road improvements.

The interchange is expected to bring thousands of high-wage jobs to the region.

Butler County commissioners, along with some members of the county's Transportation Improvement District, have loudly protested Mason's involvement in the deal in recent weeks, despite persistent work on the JEDD deal involving the Warren County city dating back more than three years. The dispute has threatened the future of the project.

As proposed, the JEDD would collect a 1.5 percent earnings tax on workers and business profits within the district. The district is roughly defined by Cincinnati-Dayton Road on the west, Butler-Warren Road on the east, Bethany Road to the north and Hamilton-Mason Road to the south.

Under the draft agreement, Middletown would get the first 5 percent of the revenue to administer the tax. Of the remaining money, Middletown will get 2 percent, Mason 15 percent and Liberty Township 83 percent.

The county commissioners maintain that Mason should not have a seat at the table for the Liberty JEDD, even if a percentage of the earnings tax is funneled to the city for road improvements. The JEDD initially included Mason as a way to pay for impacts to city roads created by the new interchange. However, it remains to be seen if the issue is a deal breaker.

Mason officials could not be reached for comment Thursday.

Journal News

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2005

JEDD

Deal OK'd despite county outcry

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

"I just don't know that it's right for someone outside of Butler County to have a position or status to have some say in what we here in Butler County do with the funding and the money from the JEDD," Commission President Charles Furmon said, adding nothing has changed his position to exclude Mason.

However, Commissioner Michael Fox said keeping Mason off the board is a matter of preference because the prospect of 15,000 new jobs and millions of dollars in investment is too great to walk away from. Fox said the concern is that Mason could prevent the project's progress, just like it prevented Ohio 129 from extending to Interstate 71. "If we invite them to the party, they may get unruly. They may do things contrary to Butler County citizens' interests," Fox said. "But, is that a reason to scuttle this project? No."

Because Fox and Furmon say it may not be legal to exclude Mason from the JEDD, Commissioner Gregory Jolivet suggested the parties meet in a public forum with legal counsel present as early as next week to hash out an alternative deal. Mason could agree to a separate economic development agreement to receive the funding and be fully excluded from the JEDD agreement, Jolivet said.

Even if the plan is not ideal, Fox said it's good news to see signs of movement. With three years and counting for Liberty to complete a JEDD agreement, Fox said the delays have cost time, money and options. So far, the county has spent more than \$1 million for engineering, on top of the \$1.65 million advance to the TID for the purchase of property to facilitate the project.

Liberty Township Administrator Dina Minneci said she hopes commissioners' feelings toward Mason will not stall the project.

"I want to keep pursuing all

"I just don't know that it's right for someone outside of Butler County to have a position or status to have some say in what we here in Butler County do with the funding and the money from the JEDD."

CHARLES FURMON | County Commissioner

this. I know there are hurdles that need to be overcome, but this is such a vital part of the future of Butler County, Liberty Township and all of Southwest Ohio," she said.

If the county and the TID pieces of the project fall through, she said, the three JEDD governments will still make their planned improvements, including work on Hamilton-Mason, Cincinnati-Dayton, Yankee, Bethany and Mason roads, and extending Cox Road north to the Green Crest Golf Course.

Middletown City Manager Bill Becker said the opportunity for his city to be a player in a regional development project is just as important as the extra income the JEDD will generate.

"Obviously, the commissioners have their opinions and the county commissioners can do as they see fit," Becker said. "I see it as a way we can encourage regional cooperation. It's what we're trying to do here in Middletown in northern Butler County. It's a matter of getting everyone's heads together and finding solutions."

John Fonner, director of the TID, which is managing the project, said Liberty Township is expected to provide about 40 percent of the Liberty Interchange project cost through the JEDD and Tax Increment Financing districts. County commissioners are expected to provide another 40 percent, Fonner said.

The conflict, he said, is a big deal.

"If you take either one of those pieces out of the project, it's hard to see how you have a project, or a total project," he said.

Contact Candice Brooks at (513) 820-2175, or e-mail her at cbrooks@coxohio.com. Contact Chris Dumond at (513) 820-2025, or e-mail him at cdumond@coxohio.com.