

Butler County engineer outlines \$11.5M capital improvements plan

County plans to replace seven more bridges this year

BY MARY LOLLI
BUTLER COUNTY BUREAU

HAMILTON — With the 2005 "orange barrel" season weeks away, Butler County Engineer Greg Wilkens on Thursday rolled out an \$11.5 million capital improvements plan for various road projects during the coming months.

"The project list is down this year from previous years because of funding issues and other concerns," Wilkens said. "But projects are

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expected to pick up again in the next year or so." What is remaining constant, however, is continuation of an aggressive bridge replacement program Wilkens began shortly after taking office in 2000.

According to Wilkens, in 1995 the county had more than 30 bridges whose conditions had deteriorated to the point where they

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needed to post reduced load limit warning signs. Today, that number has been reduced to six bridges.

"We've made great strides in our bridge program," Wilkens said.

On tap this year is replacement of seven bridges at a total estimated cost of \$2.3 million.

Additionally, 10 culverts along California Road are scheduled for replacement in anticipation of a

resurfacing project there within the next two years.

Under Wilkens' program culvert replacement is done in advance of any road resurfacing project to avoid unnecessary work later.

The 2005 project list also includes four intersection improvements totally an estimated \$6 million and resurfacing of 18.2 miles of roadways at an estimated cost of \$1.3 million.

Another \$1 million in tax increment financing transportation funding from West Chester Township is earmarked for the construction of new streets and a tie-in to Allen Road.

In all, the county engineer's office is responsible for maintaining 269 miles of roadway, 422 bridges and 1,027 culverts.

In addition to the bridge replacement program, Wilkens said county roads are on a 15-year resurfacing cycle.

Although county budgets are tight and uncertain, Wilkens said funding for many of the planned road and bridge projects is coming from various sources, including \$1.9 million in state or federal grant money. Other sources of funding include township tax increment financing districts and some community development block grants, as well as county funds.

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County seeks to meet with ODOT, lawmakers about Ohio 63 funding

BY MARY LOLLI
BUTLER COUNTY BUREAU

HAMILTON — Make no mistake about it. When it comes to prioritizing major county projects, Butler County commissioners are united in their resolve to find a way to make the long-troubled Ohio 63 extension project a reality.

That's the message they want the Ohio Department of Trans-

portation and state elected officials to understand.

County Engineer Greg Wilkens on Thursday requested another meeting with commissioners, ODOT and the county's Statehouse delegation to discuss the stalled Ohio 63 project and other projects the county considers priorities.

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Although ODOT earlier agreed to commit \$27 million to the project, estimated at \$90 million, Wilkens said he has since been told that money is not guaranteed.

"We have to make sure that we're singing the same song whenever we go to Columbus seeking funding for major projects," Wilkens said. "Because, I'm telling you right now that if they sense we're not on the same page or that we're wavering in our priorities, they'll use that as a reason for not committing money for a project."

Commissioner Gregory Jolivette, a former state representative, said he "wholeheartedly agreed" with Wilkens' assessment of how Statehouse politics work.

"It does make a difference," Jolivette said. "When you go to Columbus for funding, you better have all your ducks in order and you better be in agreement or you won't see a dime of money."

Commissioners said they have never given any indication that they are anything but "united" in their opinion that Ohio 63 is a priority.

But Wilkens said state officials presume priorities change when they read local newspaper stories about other projects getting the county's attention.

Even with the state's help, the county doesn't have the local funding it needs for the project.

To that end, Commissioner Michael Fox asked Wilkens to investigate the possibility of refinancing some existing Transportation Improvement District projects at today's lower interest rates and leverage some matching funds through residential TIFs in the areas that will receive direct benefits from the proposed extension project.

But Fox said time is running out because the state law that allowed for the implementation of residential TIFs expires in two years.

Commissioners agreed to schedule a work session with state officials as soon as possible.

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