

Butler's leaders unite for changes

Forum seeks payoff from political clout

By Janice Morse
Enquirer staff writer

FAIRFIELD TWP. — Butler County government, civic and business leaders say the Republican-dominant county has earned some political clout — and they want state lawmakers to respond with development-friendly laws and money for big-ticket road improvements.

That was the consensus of more than 80 civic, business and government leaders who participated in a government relations forum at Butler Tech.

The county helped deliver the 2004 election for President Bush and promises to play a key role in Ohio's gubernatorial contest, but the county isn't getting much in exchange, said Brian Coughlin, Butler's economic development director. "We can't even fund our infrastructure projects," he said.

"We've proven in the presidential election that Butler County matters," said County Commissioner Greg Jolivet, "and we want to make sure that our voices are heard."

County commissioners organized the forum so they can speak with one voice, with the backing of other leaders, when they tell state lawmakers what the county needs most, said Jolivet, a former state representative.

Forum attendees, who came from across the county, listed road priorities and also said they were concerned about improving public busing, railroad service to industries and airport access.

Four road priorities topped most lists:

■ Widening Ohio 4 Bypass, which runs from Fairfield Township through the city of Fairfield.

■ Extending Ohio 63, which runs east-west and stops at the western edge of Monroe.

■ Extending the Liberty interchange at Ohio 129 and Interstate 75.

■ Widening Ohio 747, a north-south thoroughfare that traverses fast-growing Liberty and West Chester townships

County Administrator Derek Conklin said participants showed they were willing to support projects outside their communities for the county's overall benefit.

Conklin said commissioners will assemble a presentation about the forum and will present the findings to state lawmakers in Columbus on Oct. 18, along with the Butler County Chamber Caucus — five chambers of commerce that operate in the county.

Two other common threads: concerns about school funding and confusing changes to state laws governing tax increment financing and residential incentive districts.

Revenues generated by those special taxing districts generated about half of the money now being used for improvements to Butler roads and bridges, said County Engineer Greg Wilkens.

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Butler County Commissioner
Greg Jolivet



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Darius Bobo, economic development director for Oxford, said the districts make up the bulk of the local matching funds required for federal and state road money, so a project up on the board doesn't represent any importance without money to back it up.

Bobo said state lawmakers need to know: "TIF's and RID's are important — and we need to keep (them)."

County Commissioner Mike Fox said the districts played a major role in helping the county lead Ohio in job creation.

Those districts' effects on school funding need to be considered, but lawmakers' changes to them could shut down the county's job-creation machine, Fox said.

"The state ought to be looking at us as a model, not trying to stamp it out like an infectious disease before it spreads," he said.

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