

Port authority: Rail study to help county stay on economic track

Freight traffic may be key to jobs, economy

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HAMILTON — A project to secure and grow the more than 50 companies in Butler County dependent on rail freight was initiated by the port authority Monday afternoon.

The authority hosted a stakeholders meeting attended by representatives from Hamilton, Middletown, Fairfield, Trenton, and Liberty and St. Clair townships — as well as a handful of private companies — to introduce a \$125,000 study of the county's railroad networks and how they can be improved.

By expanding and improving the county's local railroad networks, the county can help to retain more than 5,000 rail-dependent jobs



John Fonner
Port authority secretary

passes and the many at-grade crossings in the county, the way to get CSX and Norfolk Southern to cooperate, Fonner said, is to show them how improvements will benefit their bottom lines.

Greater Hamilton Chamber of Commerce President Kenny Craig said a recent agreement between the port authority and CSX Transportation to reimburse the authority for the \$80,000 cost of improvements to a local switch illustrated that thinking.

and create new economic development projects, authority Secretary John Fonner said.

Although many have expressed frustration trying to convince the railroads to maintain over-

"The practice has been refunds based on new cars that come into the area," Craig said. "We'd like for that to change, for them to increase the infrastructure based on the fact that we need it, but that hasn't been my experience. They're not going to spend money unless there's additional revenue that's going to come in."

Fonner said the authority should make back its investment in the switch within three years at \$50 paid by CSX per car that comes into the industrial park served by that switch.

Middletown City Manager Bill Becker asked whether the time and money to be spent on the rail freight study would be wisely invested.

"Every company I've talked to in Middletown that relies on rail has horror stories," Becker said. "If we develop a great network

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Grant may help railroad dealings

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and they can't service their customers, what good is it?"

As traffic on the main rail lines passing through the county has picked up in recent years, Fonner said, the ability to slow down traffic to serve local companies has diminished. One key to the study, he said, will be finding ways to beef up the local rail network to efficiently pull traffic off those main lines.

He said Middletown and Hamilton share many problems and potential projects. Both are constrained by urban environments and the way rail traffic interacts with automobile traffic, but there is also the possibility of redeveloping blighted industrial properties that used to be served by the railroads.

Projects like the Midd Cities development in Middletown, which converted old industrial buildings into space for new companies that serve AK Steel, could be replicated, he said.

Other areas under consideration include CSX's Indianapolis line that runs through Oxford, the Norfolk Southern line that runs across the Liberty Township-Lemon Township border and heavily-crossed areas of New Miami and St. Clair Township.

The \$100,000 grant from the Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana Regional Council of Governments requires a \$25,000 match from county governments. Fonner said he expects to ask the county for \$10,000 with the remaining \$15,000 to come from township and city governments.

"The direction this study takes will likely be influenced by which local governments decide to participate," Fonner said.

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