

Groups to study how rail will aid county

Hamilton one of cities on list of stops

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HAMILTON — Two groups will study how Butler County could benefit from the \$3.3 billion building of a statewide high-speed freight and commuter rail network.

Officials are looking for good news as Middletown is among about 20 Ohio cities tentatively scheduled for stops on the network. The plan also calls for possible rail or bus connections in Hamilton and Oxford, and may involve the county's steel and construction industries.

"We haven't been contacted so far about their economic studies, but we're aware that the city is listed as a stop on early plans and we're certainly supportive of that," Middletown Planning Director Marty Kohler said. "We'd be glad to help them if they need us."

The Ohio Rail Development Commission is spearheading the project to connect Cincinnati, Dayton and Columbus with Ohio's Great Lakes cities and Detroit. A larger network could connect the Ohio system to others serving the Midwest, Canada and New England.

The state rail system would run as fast as 110 mph and would carry passengers as well as freight.

A study of the hub completed last year that showed the system could create 6,000 construction jobs, 6,000 permanent jobs through economic development and up to 1,800 railroad jobs wasn't thorough enough to sell the plan, Rail Development Commission Spokesman Stu Nicholson said.

Without a federal system in place to readily fund the multi-billion-dollar system, Nicholson said, it will be a lot easier to cross political hurdles with a more detailed economic impact study.

"We need to show exactly how this will make Ohio a more attractive place to do business and draw in more business," he said. "There are decision makers that need to see the numbers. They want to see it in black and white

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and in great detail. That's what we're doing."

The commission is paying \$500,000 for tandem studies. One will be performed by Frederick, Md.-based Transportation Economics & Management Systems, Inc., the group that did the initial impact study. The other will be carried out by Doug Harnish of Dayton-based GEM Public Sector Services, Wright State University

professors John Blair and Robert Premus, and Samuel Staley, former president of the Buckeye Institute and current director of urban and land use policy at the Reason Foundation.

Nicholson said it's important to have someone like Staley, a frequent critic of passenger and light rail, as part of the study group.

Staley said his opposition has been rooted in a lack of demand and revenue. This plan, he said, has the potential to be different.

"There's the potential for this to make money," he said. "I'm involved in this research because I want to see if the numbers work. If you can show me a light rail project that will cover its costs, I'm all for it."

And if the numbers show it

won't work, he said, he's been encouraged by Rail Development Commission Executive Director Jim Seney to say so.

The economic impact studies are expected to be highly detailed, showing localized construction and long-term economic impacts at the city and county level, Nicholson said. The study will consider which industries would be impacted, possibly down to which companies would benefit.

The studies are expected to be complete in about a year. If they show the rail system is feasible, the commission would move on to an environmental study to pin down corridors and stops, he said.

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