

Mayor hoping new president a friend of high-speed rail

Heather Rutz - Jan. 30th, 2008
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LIMA — As city officials met the incoming Ohio Rail Development Commission chairwoman Wednesday, they were also looking at a larger change in leadership.

Mayor David Berger and Chief of Staff Catherine Garlock met new commission Chairwoman Jolene Molitoris and talked about efforts to gain funding for environmental studies for the proposed Ohio Hub high-speed rail plan.

Creating a high-speed rail plan around the country will take a federal funding commitment of 80 percent of the project, Berger said.

That support won't happen, Berger said, until the country elects a president who supports high-speed rail as a third leg of the nation's transportation system.

"All of us are focused on what will be a change in our federal administration that will hopefully result in a new commitment to high-speed rail," Berger said. "It is a third and much needed leg of a national transportation system, with overuse of the first two, highways and airports."

The Ohio Hub got a boost in 2007 when Gov. Ted Strickland made clear his support of the project as piece of his overall plan to revitalize Ohio's economy.

The Ohio Hub includes a first phase of high-speed rail among Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati. In a later phase, it includes a stop in Lima on a route from Columbus to Fort Wayne that would connect with a high-speed train to Chicago.

The project — provided it is completely built, uses a higher-speed train, and gets federal financial help for construction — is solvent and provides economic development for the state and communities, according to a report from the commission.

Berger said Lima and Ohio are positioning themselves well to be ready whenever federal money is made available. Ohio is one of eight states included in the Midwest region. Capital cost estimates just for Ohio exceed \$5 billion, according to the commission.

A system of 125 mph trains would change the way we live and do business, Berger said.

"We are losing out on enormous opportunities," Berger said. "The idea that you could get to Chicago in two hours means you do business differently there than you do now. Getting to the Columbus airport in less than an hour means you travel differently. It means you can live in places like Lima and have practical access to other places."