

Guest column

State has unfinished business in Ohio Valley

During the 1990s, Ohio has been one of the nation's economic development leaders. More than 7,200 U.S. and foreign companies have invested in new and expanded facilities in Ohio - more than any other state.

Spurred by an aggressive economic development policy initiated by former Gov. George Voinovich, Ohio has enjoyed unrivaled success, and strengthened by new strategically targeted initiatives launched by current Gov. Bob Taft, the state's economic development efforts could well continue to produce enviable results.

Of particular note is the Taft administration's continuing commitment to promote development in the state's Appalachian region, where the average unemployment rate is about 50 percent higher than the national average. This new strategic imperative focused squarely on eastern and southeastern Ohio reflects a clear understanding that there is important unfinished business to be completed in this part of the state - and new economic growth opportunities to be unlocked.

The key to economic development in the Ohio Valley is to enhance the region's multi-modal transportation capabilities. Air, water, rail and highway transportation networks must be developed and fully integrated for the region to successfully attract new business, especially manufacturing and distribution operations. Why? Because to compete successfully in a global marketplace that demands shorter production cycles, just-in-time delivery and the ability to cut costs, companies need multiple transportation options that offer speed, flexibility, convenience and value - all of which are defining characteristics of a fully integrated multi-modal transportation system.



PAUL MIFSUD

Importance of good highways

No economic development project in eastern Ohio is a higher priority than completing the modern, four-lane highway link between Columbus and Pittsburgh.

A 28-mile stretch between Cadiz and Newcomerstown is the only remaining gap in the four-lane highway connection running from the northeast edge of Interstate 270 in Columbus all the way to Pittsburgh International Airport.

When completed, this highway also will provide fast and easy access to Interstate 77 for north-south travel and transport, including important direct links to regional cargo and passenger airports in Cleveland and Akron/Canton.

Part of the stimulus for completing this highway link is what Pennsylvania has done on its side of the border. Pennsylvania already has made major

upgrades to U.S. Route 22, and work on the Findlay Connector, which runs south and west from the Pittsburgh International Airport, will begin in 2001. Pennsylvania's additional plans for further improving access to the airport will reduce drive times to and from Steubenville. These investments are critical, because they suggest that Ohio's strategy should be to complete the highway connection to Pittsburgh by linking U.S. Route 22 at Cadiz with U.S. Route 36 in Tuscarawas County.

Currently, at the eastern end of the macro corridor between Columbus and Pittsburgh, a modern four-lane highway (Route 22) connects Pittsburgh to Cadiz. At the western end, State Route 16 is being expanded to four lanes from Columbus to Coshocton, and then into Tuscarawas County via Route 36. All that's missing is the Cadiz-to-Newcomerstown connection - a straight shot of just 28 miles.

Two other possible options are to link Cadiz to Route 36 via U.S. Route 250 (in central Tuscarawas County, north of Newcomerstown), or to upgrade Route 22 from Cadiz south and west to Cambridge. Both of these options, while perhaps less compelling than directly linking Route 22 with Route 36, would offer important connections with I-77 for north-south transport.

Completing the macro corridor between Columbus and Pittsburgh has many potential benefits. It will:

- Provide a quick, direct and modern highway link between Columbus and Pittsburgh, broadening access throughout the region to Columbus' two major passenger and air cargo airports, Pittsburgh's international airport and the Ohio River;

- Relieve truck traffic on I-70, which runs parallel to the south and is already at nearly full capacity;

- Enhance the ability of economically distressed communities in Harrison County and southern Tuscarawas County to attract new development, while providing an incentive for existing employers throughout the region to expand current operations; and
- Offer improved access to regional

tourism destinations such as the Longaberger Homestead in Dresden, Roscoe Village in Coshocton and the recreational lakes scattered between Cadiz and I-77.

The importance of rail systems

The rail piece of the multi-modal transportation puzzle is critical. To continue to attract industrial development and high-paying manufacturing jobs, the Ohio Valley must have a rail network that efficiently and cost-effectively serves second-tier cities and links both current and prospective manufacturers with suppliers and markets.

Improved rail lines also are needed to ship lower-sulfur coal from Pennsylvania and West Virginia to coal-fired electric generating plants in the Ohio Valley; this will ensure continued access to low-cost electricity for the region's electricity-intensive industries.

Unfortunately, with the sale of Conrail to CSX and Norfolk Southern in 1997-98, Ohio was left with just two major rail companies and a fragmented network of short-line operators. As happened in the airline industry, CSX and Norfolk Southern have strategically focused their efforts on improving their mainline rail networks that serve

core markets, consolidating whenever possible and abandoning their lines serving smaller communities such as Bylesville and Marietta.

There are many short-line rail service providers ready to serve Ohio's second-tier markets. The Panhandle Railroad, for example, which runs roughly parallel to the Columbus-Pittsburgh corridor, provides one-day rail service from the Ohio Valley west to southern Franklin County rail yards and east to the Ohio River.

Short-line operators of the Panhandle, however, are often finding it difficult to gain access to CSX's and Norfolk Southern's mainlines. The threat is especially acute in the Ohio Valley, where critical short-line rail service to and from some of the region's key cities is limited or non-existent - and getting worse.

One of the Ohio Valley's economic development priorities must be to upgrade the region's short-line rail network - not just along east-west routes parallel to the Columbus-Pittsburgh corridor, but also south from Newark, Zanesville and Cambridge to the Ohio River, a quadrant of the state that is woefully underserved by cargo rail lines.

The use of water transportation

The federal government has spent hundreds of millions of dollars improving the system of locks and dams along

the Ohio River, creating one of the most efficient river transportation systems in the world.

Navigable year-round, the Ohio River offers an inexpensive alternative for shipping materials by barge to inland industrial centers and to the nation's largest port at New Orleans. However, it will not be a viable transportation alternative - and will not attract significant industrial development - without quick and easy access to and from the region's highways, rail lines and airports.

The importance of air travel

The importance of improving the Ohio Valley's access to Pittsburgh's international passenger and cargo airport was, unfortunately, overlooked in the 1993 "Access Ohio" report, the Ohio Department of Transportation's long-range plan for developing an efficient multi-modal transportation system for Ohio for the 21st century. Policy makers must now acknowledge that improved highway and rail access to the Pittsburgh airport is essential to maximizing the region's economic development potential. It simply makes sense.

A secondary air transportation priority, however, is the enhancement of local regional airports throughout the region. Major industrial development is more likely to occur in areas able to accommodate the corporate jets used by company CEOs and overnight air delivery services, which require runways at least 5,500 feet long.

Currently, the only runways of this size in the Ohio Valley east of Portsmouth and Jackson are in Zanesville, Pittsburgh and Parkersburg, W.Va. It's critical, therefore, that Athens, Cambridge, Gallipolis and Steubenville follow through on existing plans to expand their runways, and that future airport expansion in the region be sensitive to this requirement.

An effectively integrated multi-modal transportation system will help position the Ohio Valley to reap the kind of economic growth that other parts of the state have enjoyed throughout the 1990s.

Viewed within the context of Ohio's new strategic imperative, southeastern Ohio is a kind of "last frontier" - the last area of the state to remain economically underdeveloped. A renewed commitment to develop the region's multi-modal transportation assets will herald the dawn of a new era of development, investment and growth in communities throughout the Ohio Valley.

(Mifsud is president and CEO of Kingwood Consulting Group Inc. in Columbus.)