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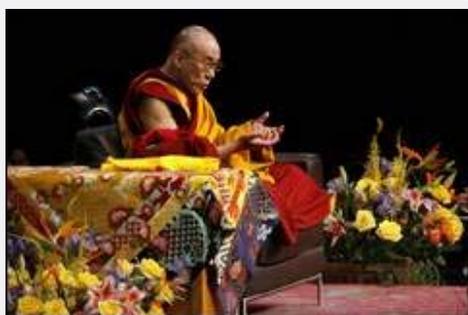


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'Other Ohio' falls short on transit panel; 55-member task force has only 2 from Toledo area



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By **IGNAZIO MESSINA**
BLADE STAFF WRITER

Columbus and Cleveland will be well-represented when a new Ohio transportation task force meets next month.

Twenty-eight of the task force members live or work in the Columbus area and 12 in the Cleveland area.

Five members hail from Cincinnati and two out of the 55 people appointed to the Ohio 21st Century Transportation Priorities Task Force are from Toledo.

The group was created to find the fairest way to finance transportation systems for the entire state.

Ohio Department of Transportation officials, who took the lead in establishing the task force and selecting some of its members, said the group will be a first-of-its-kind "transportation conversation" and includes a diverse mix of industry experts and state leaders.

Jolene Molitoris, ODOT assistant director, said the group's goal is to look at the entire state, not just the needs of the large urban areas.

She said the list of members is geographically balanced because a fair number of people represent statewide organizations.

"We tried hard to get geographic diversity," Ms. Molitoris said.

"You need to take out of that equation all of the people who represent statewide organizations because they, by definition, represent everyone and all of their offices are in Columbus."

Mayor Carty Finkbeiner doesn't see it that way.

On Friday, Mr. Finkbeiner said the task force seems to be loaded with Columbus and Cleveland people.

"All too often, when appointments are made to statewide committees, Columbus is easy because those are the people familiar with lobbyists and they are right there," Mr. Finkbeiner said.

"No city in Ohio has greater transportation assets than does Toledo with Lake Erie, an international airport capable of

handling any aircraft in the world, the nation's fourth-largest rail hub, and two transcontinental highways intersecting here," he said.

"Toledo should be first in the minds of state leaders when it comes to transportation."

Toledo, however, is the only major city in Ohio without a direct interstate route to the state's capital.

Mayor Finkbeiner called for additional appointments from northwest Ohio.

Local appointees

The Toledo members appointed to the task force are Mark Vonderembse, a professor and former director of the University of Toledo's Intermodal Transportation Institute, and Tony Reams, president of the Toledo Metropolitan Area Council of Governments.

Mr. Reams said he does not intend to "stake out territory" but will not let northwest Ohio be ignored in the process.

"I am on the multimodal committee and my goal is to promote northwest Ohio assets as an integral part of multimodal economy," he said. "The entire state of Ohio is positioned well geographically for multimodal. ... Biased as I might be, I think northwest Ohio is even more strategically in place than the rest of the state."

Intermodal and multimodal refer to various transportation methods for moving passengers and goods, but discussions of Toledo's intermodal potential usually involves transporting freight in containers via rail, ship, and truck.

The containers are transferred between shipping methods without any handling of the freight itself.

That reduces cargo handling and improves security, reduces damage and loss, and allows freight to be transported faster.

James Hartung, president of the Toledo-Lucas County Port Authority, is not upset over the number of Toledoans sitting on the task force.

"The quality of people we have representing is solid," Mr. Hartung said.

"I have to maintain eternal optimism that northwest Ohio will be viewed on its merits as a transportation hub, not be viewed on the strength of political clout we have in Columbus."

The 'Other Ohio'

Rick Platt, executive director of the Heath-Newark-Licking County Port Authority, said the task force's makeup is reminiscent of the "Other Ohio" movement.

The "Other Ohio" movement, a coalition of newspaper executives and public officials, had a common perception that a disproportionate share of state resources go to the Three C's: Columbus, Cleveland, and Cincinnati.

The Blade's editorial page was a major supporter of the movement.

"I think it's fair to say there are a lot of gaps in this map," Mr. Platt said referring to the locations of those on the task force.

He is among a seven-county partnership pushing for a Columbus-to-Pittsburgh highway corridor, which calls for completing a 160-mile highway link.

Mr. Platt said he fears that endeavor, as well as the transportation needs of other parts of the state, could be forgotten.

Ty Marsh, president of the Columbus Chamber of Commerce, who will be chairman, declined to be interviewed.

The vice chairmen will be Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson and Montgomery County Commissioner Deborah Lieberman of Dayton.

Setting priorities

In describing the task force in a written statement, ODOT Director James Beasley said Ohio needs to "prioritize how the state balances the movement of people and freight," as well as reduce congestion, create jobs, and encourage growth.

Part of the goal is to link all modes of transportation - connecting highways to rail, aviation, water ports, and transit, Mr. Beasley said.

Scott Varner, ODOT spokesman, said the timing of the task force is meant to coincide with the state's 2010-11 biennial budget.

Ms. Molitoris added: "Ohio will be speaking with one voice when we go to the legislators in Columbus."

She also stressed that public input would be solicited from each corner of the state.

Ohio Sen. Steve Buehrer (R., Delta), chairman of the influential Highways and Transportation Committee, said he doesn't find the makeup of the task force of concern because it is not the only means for northwest Ohio to bear influence on transportation matters. His chairman position, for instance, is another important asset for the region, Mr. Buehrer said.

"I think we always want to be pushing for a spot at the table, but I don't see this as a crisis by any stretch of the imagination," Mr. Buehrer said. "I think this task force is only one way that people from northwest Ohio can weigh in."

Campaign contributors

Among the task force members are three major campaign contributors for Gov. Ted Strickland.

Ron Pizzuti, chairman and chief executive officer of Pizzuti Cos., a Columbus real estate developer, gave Mr. Strickland \$10,500.

Cleveland real estate mogul Albert Ratner, chairman of Forest City Enterprises, gave \$10,000. John Pepper, chairman of the board for the Walt Disney Co., also handed over \$10,000.

All three have historically been major political contributors - giving former governor Bob Taft money.

Mr. Pizzuti gave Mr. Taft \$15,000 for his statewide elections from 1994 to 2002, Mr. Ratner gave him \$4,550, and Mr. Pepper gave him \$12,000.

Keith Dailey, a spokesman for Mr. Strickland, said political contributions had no bearing on appointments to the task force.

"We believe that the intention behind this task force, which ODOT is responsible for, will successfully reach out to every community in Ohio and allow them to participate in the activities and the conversations of the task force - as well as through the Web site," Mr. Dailey said.

Also on the task force is Doug Moormann, a former Taft aide, who took a \$5,000 loan from former Toledo-area coin dealer and Republican fund-raiser Tom Noe and was convicted on misdemeanors ethics charges for failing to disclose the loan and meals from Noe.

Several new members were added late last week to the list of task force members on the ODOT Web site.

A review by The Blade found at least 14 of the members are affiliated with a statewide organization, including the

Ohio Municipal League Board, the County Commissioners' Association of Ohio, the Ohio Contractors Association, the Ohio and Vicinity Regional Council of Carpenters, and the Ohio Environmental Council - all in Columbus.

Gene Krebs, co-director of Greater Ohio, a Columbus-based statewide network of organizations to promote state policies for land use and development, said the other parts of Ohio will not be forgotten.

"We are very much aware Toledo is a multimodal capital of Ohio," Mr. Krebs said.

Contact Ignazio Messina at:
imessina@theblade.com
or 419-724-6171.
