

Enterprise article for 04/17/2012

Two weeks ago I attended a meeting of the Williams County Mayors Association to hear a presentation on the future of the Ohio Turnpike given by Executive Director Richard Hodges. Some of you may know Mr. Hodges as he is an Archbold native and lived many years in the Delta-Swanton Area. Mr. Hodges has had an extensive career having been a Fulton County Treasurer, an Ohio House Representative, Executive VP of the Mechanical Contractors Assn. of NW Ohio, a department director at the Ohio Bureau of Worker's Compensation, and a past Ohio Turnpike Commission Board Member. He is well spoken and easy to understand.

The Ohio Turnpike is the best system of highway travel in Ohio, and the third highest rated highway in the entire nation. Criteria for this rating range from excellent overall maintenance, low toll fees, a very low accident rate, and modern rest plazas. Our turnpike is an outstanding asset to our state, and more importantly, to Northern Ohio. It is also 98.8% self funded, with the remaining 1.2% revenue provided by a five cent per gallon federal gas tax.

Thus, the discussion begins.

The State of Ohio's total revenues are suffering an \$8 billion dollar deficit. Likewise, the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) is currently experiencing a \$1.8 billion dollar shortfall in funding highway and bridge projects that have been previously planned and scheduled, but because of the economic downturn and Ohio budget crisis, have been postponed.

The Governor is entertaining either selling or leasing the turnpike to a private entity, or combining the turnpike with ODOT in order to supplement the ODOT budget for highways that run throughout our state.

In the past few years, the turnpike revenues have been flat; however, the turnpike has \$55 million in reserves. It is the Governor's opinion that Ohio should redirect the funds that currently can only be used for the turnpike to supplement ODOT's projects all over Ohio. This change would require approval by the Ohio House and Senate.

The concern for those of us in the NW Ohio is that the superb level of quality and service the turnpike provides not just for travelers, but more critically for commerce, will be compromised. Northwest Ohio is still experiencing higher levels of unemployment and has suffered more economically than other parts of our state, and our recovery has been slower as well. If our treasured turnpike is compromised as a result of these possible proposed changes, our region will suffer more.

Yes, the argument can be made that all Ohio highways and bridges will be improved by correcting ODOT's financial situation, but my concern is that once the turnpike is sold or leased, we will never have the opportunity to get it back, or be able to demand a high level of maintenance, or control the price of tolls. Furthermore, combining the turnpike with ODOT doesn't guarantee that Northern Ohio highways will have any priority over approved projects for any other location in the state.

I could write many more pages of information on this topic. However, the basic points are made here and if you desire additional information, consult The Ohio Turnpike's website. There is a plethora of useful information there, along with their financial reports. Also, you may direct any questions to Mr. Richard Hodges, 888.876.7453. I encourage you to follow up with some research and with your elected officials at all levels. I will provide updates to this discussion as I receive them.