

The Telegram

Jackson city to get \$2 million for improvements in rail line



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Ohio Governor Ted Strickland and 18th District Congressman Zack Space have both announced the City of Jackson will be receiving \$2,000,000 for rail-line rehabilitation to the city-owned shortline railroad.

Space said the funds will, "support the local economy, create jobs, and improve infrastructure."

To acknowledge receipt of the federal Stimulus Funds, Jackson Mayor Randy Heath held a press conference Friday morning, March 27, to thank Jackson City Service/Safety Director, Bill Sheward, for the work he did in applying for the funding and to talk about the importance of the rail line when it comes to local business.

"This is certainly most thrilling news and possesses the potential to have a tremendous financial impact on our community and region as well. Almost every major business inquiry we receive asks if rail service is available," Heath said. "With us working steadily to hopefully someday find a suitable tenant for the Meridian building, this really helps."

The press conference took place at the Jackson Area YMCA where the Spring Showcase is being held. As Executive Director of the Chamber of Commerce Heath not only originated the special event, but organizes it while also serving as mayor. "I think this announcement today concerning our railroad and the obvious success the Spring Showcase still possesses demonstrates I can handle the two positions and can be successful in both," said Heath.

"The availability of rail transportation for freight purposes is vital in growing any area's economy. Improving our city's shortline railroad to operate at peak efficiency for the benefit of our business and industrial community has been a commitment of mine since becoming mayor," Heath added. He said obtaining the railroad in about 1985 could be credited to then Mayor Tom Evans and Service Director Ron Speakman.

Speakman said, "We saved more than 2,000 jobs by getting the railroad." He mentioned the General Mills (then Pillsbury) plant in Wellston, Austin Powder in Vinton County, and Nock and Son near Oak Hill. "The current administration should be congratulated on keeping the railroad viable."

Heath also gave Sheward a large pat on the back for "doing yeoman's duty" in obtaining the Stimulus

Funds. "I had two days to get the forms filled out. It has been an interesting process and it was hectic in our office," Sheward commented. He said city workers got the necessary information, passed it on to him, and he filled in the blanks. "It took some effort."

He told The Telegram news of the funding "was a total shock," and said he had initially applied for \$15,000,000 and didn't think the city had a chance to receive anything. "We certainly have a need to rehabilitate the railroad and \$2 million will go a long way in doing some of the work." He said by today's standards, the cost of building one mile of rail line is about \$1,500,000 and the city owns 80 miles of line.

Sheward feels work will focus on bridge repairs, tie replacement, and possibly some new rail in areas where it is needed. He added that bids are currently out for work on a tunnel with those funds coming from \$600,000 in a state loan and grant applied for, and received, by the administration. There is also money in that funding package for some tie replacement.

Sheward said many of the specifics concerning Stimulus money are not yet known, such as are the dollars outright grants or are matching funds required. He said his understanding is that the first of the money will become available in June and that funds will be administered by the Ohio Department of Transportation.

He added he had made application for seven separate projects using Stimulus money. "I hope to see you again with more announcements about funds we may receive in the future."

Heath also expressed gratitude to Governor Ted Strickland who has, "been very kind to Jackson County in assisting us with projects such as this, both as a congressman and as governor."

In using the Spring Showcase as a backdrop, Heath said he wanted to stress the importance of sending a unified public-private message. "We have to send out a clear message our community is a very good place to do business."

In other Stimulus-related news, Strickland noted that the Vinton County Engineer will receive \$500,000 for the resurfacing of about 10 miles of two-lane paving along a variety of county roads.

Strickland also reported that ODOT will expedite construction on the final two phases of the three-phased Nelsonville Bypass by investing \$150 million in Stimulus funds. Phase one of this new four-lane roadway carrying U.S. Route 33 between the cities of Nelsonville and Logan began last year. Under previous planning, these final two phases were not scheduled to begin until after 2012.