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County leaders eye new industrial park

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BELMONT COUNTY officials are going after additional grant money that will assist with the development of a new industrial park near Barnesville.

Just days after Ohio Lt. Gov. Lee Fisher announced that the Belmont County Port Authority had been awarded a \$575,000 Roadwork Development Grant to go toward infrastructure development at the proposed Eastern Ohio Regional Industrial Park in the village of Barnesville, Belmont County Commissioners and county Port Authority Director Larry Merry announced Wednesday that the county had applied for additional funds.

The newly requested grant for another \$175,000 is now being considered by the board which oversees Industrial Site Improvement Funds. The Port Authority is expected find out whether or not this will be authorized near the end of this month.

"The initial grant will help build an access road into the property," said Merry. "The Port Authority, hopefully by the end of the summer, will own 200 acres of land."

This entire process may take up to two or three years as the county seeks additional grants and works to bring infrastructure to the site. However, Merry said they are still working today to bring in companies.

"That's the key to be able to provide living-wage jobs," said Merry. "We're still working to bring businesses in there."

The site proposed for the Eastern Ohio Regional Industrial Park is located about a mile north of Barnesville, just west of Ohio 800. County leaders said Oxford Mining Company, which owns the formerly strip-mined property, has worked hand-in-hand with the county to bring this proposed venture on the front burner. County officials intend to secure an initial 200 acres of the property as the project draws businesses into the park, and the county will have the option to obtain a total of up to 825 acres of the undeveloped property.

While the county's present industrial park – Fox Commerce Park located west of St. Clairsville – continues to welcome new small- to medium-sized businesses, the newly proposed industrial park near Barnesville is expected to focus on accommodations that will attract larger businesses such as distribution centers.

The site is an ideal location for a new industrial park, county officials said, because of its easy access to Interstate 70, the proximity to the Belmont County Airpark near Barnesville and the large area of undeveloped land.

Merry added that mineral rights will go to the county as ownership of the property is transferred, thereby avoiding any potential problems in the future with underground coal mining.

In other matters, Belmont County Auditor Joe Pappano recommended the county help the East Ohio Regional Hospital refinance debts to save nearly \$1 million a year.

This action is required to be conducted through a local legislative body, in which the commissioners act as fiscal liaisons, officials explained.

Belmont County Commissioner Mark Thomas said that this will not in any way affect the county's credit rating or ability to borrow money. The county has worked with EORH on this issue of bonds for a number of years, and Thomas stressed that the hospital is responsible for the debt, not the county.

Also on the agenda was the discussion of the Belmont County Community Wellness Coalition, which was started 18 months ago and mandated by the state for public schools to meet certain wellness guidelines.

This is an unfunded mandate, but more than \$25,000 in outside grants for individual schools has already been generated.

Polly Loy, family consumer sciences educator from The Ohio State University Extension Office said

there are no penalties yet if schools don't abide with the wellness guidelines, however, "the free and reduced lunch money from the federal government is at risk if they don't get on board.

- Additionally, commissioners awarded the bid for a Belmont County Engineer's project – a slip repair on Clover Ridge Road – to McConnell Contracting, Inc.

- The board approved was the motion to adopt a resolution authorizing the distribution of \$1.8 million to pay part of the cost of acquiring and constructing sanitary sewer improvements, which will include the exit 215 sewer line project, the village of Belmont pump station and forced main project as well as the village of Morristown pump station project.

- Commissioners entered into an annual software maintenance Agreement with Maximus Financial Services Inc. on behalf of the Department of Job and Family Services, for the Quarterly Information Consolidation System (QuIC), QuIC Plus and County Version Random Moment Sampling System (RMS).

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