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New ORDC Chair Sees Synergy in Rail System

When it comes to the state's rail system, Jolene Molitoris told Hannah News she believes what has worked in the past will work again to help create a vibrant transportation system for the state.

Molitoris, the new chair of the Ohio Rail Development Commission (ORDC), comes to the job with over 30 years of experience in the railroad industry. Under Gov. Richard Celeste, Molitoris served as the executive director of the Ohio Rail Transportation Authority (ORTC), a precursor for the ORDC.

In 1993, she was appointed by President Clinton to be the federal railroad administrator, becoming the first woman to serve in the position.

Molitoris said she sees some of the things that worked when she was with the ORTC and at the federal level working for Ohio today. She also said all the pieces Ohio needs for a great transportation system are already present.

While the federal railroad administrator, she said the department created a strategy that focused on building partnerships between the railroads, the employees, the unions, businesses and the government.

"It's all about coming up with a system that helps business," she said. "Part of what I think the ORDC is good at is the ability to listen, understand all the parties and to find that common ground that gives us that go forward strategy."

She sees rail as a part of the whole state transportation system, and said the administration agrees. She noted that Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) Director James Beasley has attended every one of ORDC's meetings, whereas previous directors sent someone in their stead.

When asked about her vision and what she hopes to accomplish as the chair of the ORDC, Molitoris stays on her message of teamwork. She said she has been meeting individually with each of the other commissioners and hopes the group can release one consensus agenda in January.

"There are trends, similarities in their thinking and in their vision," she said of her discussions with commission members.

"My responsibility is to create a vision that reflects that."

Molitoris said she currently sees a vibrant rail system for freight in the state and gives credit to rail companies for what they have done since rail was deregulated. She said railroads in Ohio are in key locations, an asset for the state.

The part that Ohio doesn't do so well in is passenger rail, Molitoris said. She said people in the U.S. are becoming more mobile. Building a strong passenger system in Ohio will be important for keeping people in the state. She said there is evidence that people in the state want such a system.

"The evidence that was gathered and put into Ohio Hub proposal is quite compelling," she said. "I think for people living in places where it is very much a part of the culture; they can't imagine life without it. Our people have not had that opportunity. As people have traveled around the world, they see so many things. They see places like Boston, and Washington, where you're so mobile in so many ways."

She said the real challenge for the commission is how to get it to that reality as economically and as quickly as possible.

She sees the Ohio Hub as the spine of a new passenger system in the state, and said the state needs to give more support to proposals like streetcars in cities.

She said that the success of transportation levies in other states shows that people are supporting improvements and changes to the transportation in rail systems. They want choice, and their choices should not be limited to just cars or just trains, she said.

"I think there is truly a groundswell," she said. "It's really coming from the people and it is impacting legislators