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ODOT urges regional agencies to spend carryover funds for projects

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By ROBERT VITALE

Regional planning agencies carrying millions of dollars on their books from year to year are being told by the Ohio Department of Transportation to start spending.

Ohio has too many aging and congested highways to hold back money that's supposed to go toward fixing them, state transportation Director Jerry Wray said.

According to his department's calculations, 17 regional planning agencies in Ohio left \$169.8 million in federal transportation dollars unspent during the state's last fiscal year. Over each of the past four years, ODOT estimates agencies have kept an average of \$155.5 million on hand.

"We're asking all our partners to step up," Wray said. "We're encouraging them to be more productive."

The state plans to force agencies such as the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission to spend more of their yearly allocations from Washington.

But leaders of the agencies, called metropolitan planning organizations, say they sometimes stockpile funds to pay for future projects or are left with unspent cash because of lower-than-expected bids and unforeseen delays.

Eight of 21, however, have spent less money on average than they've collected from Washington over the past four years.

MORPC, which includes Columbus and 43 other local governments in 12 central Ohio counties, ended fiscal 2011 with \$8.4 million in reserve, one of the lowest totals in the state. The money comes from federal gasoline taxes, passes through the state and is directed toward local roadwork, mass transit and efforts to reduce traffic congestion.

MORPC has ended the past four years with an average of almost \$8 million in unspent funds. MORPC Principal Engineer Nathaniel Vogt said the unspent funds don't accumulate, but rather represent an ongoing balance.

Across Ohio, the agencies have spent less than 14 percent of the federal transportation money in their accounts over the past four years. They used less than 8 percent — \$14.4 million of \$184.3 million available — in fiscal 2011.

The rule that the Ohio Department of Transportation is proposing would require agencies to spend 75 percent of their federal allocations by 2016 or risk losing the money to the state. That would have put nearly \$124 million more into Ohio highways, roads, bike trails and mass transit last year.

Don Spang, executive director of the Dayton-based Miami Valley Regional Planning Commission and president of the Ohio Association of Regional Councils, said although agencies helped write the proposed rule, the change would take away some flexibility.

As ODOT grapples with declining budgets and rising costs, Wray wants the planning agencies to contribute more toward work in their regions. Earlier this month, MORPC agreed to pitch in \$8.2 million toward a state-highway upgrade that will carry traffic from Rt. 23 to Rickenbacker Airport in Pickaway County.

The local money moved the project to a 2013 start date. It had been a second-tier priority with no start date.

Although he has bragged in recent weeks about saving money at ODOT, Wray also has said the agency will spend any savings to speed up highway projects across Ohio that now face delays of as long as 13 years.

A former Licking County engineer, Wray said he entered office in 1980 with \$500,000 unspent in a budget of about \$3.6 million.

“One year we ended with \$15,000,” said Wray, who left Licking County in 1991 to become ODOT director under Gov. George V. Voinovich. He returned in 2011 under Gov. John Kasich.

“I consider that my most successful year.”

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