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Vicites lobbies lawmakers for federal aid

By Paul Sunyak, Herald-Standard
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Stressing that the county finally has the required local matching funds to get federal dollars for two big projects, Fayette County Commission Chairman Vincent A. Vicites lobbied two U.S. senators and three U.S. representatives this week at a legislative conference in the nation's capital.

Vicites sought federal aid for development of the Fayette County Business Park along Route 40 and for a runway extension that would allow jets as large as the Boeing 737 to land and take off from Connellsville Airport.

A letter Vicites distributed to federal elected officials pegged the cost of highway linkages to the business park at \$4.7 million, with another \$4.3 million needed for internal infrastructure within the 277-acre park. The letter also said the county needs \$9 million to complete the design, land acquisition and utility coordination phases of the proposed runway extension.

Vicites met with U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) on Monday and met with the appropriations director for U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) on Tuesday, while attending the National Association of Counties annual legislative conference. He said he also dropped off copies of the letter in the offices of U.S. Reps. Frank Mascara (D-Charleroi), John Murtha (D-Johnstown) and Bill Shuster (R-Hollidaysburg).

"All of them got the same proposal," said Vicites, noting that the letter was accompanied by detailed project estimates from the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority, which is developing the business park, and the Fayette County Airport

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Authority, which is overseeing the runway extension.

Vicites said he also mentioned the growth potential of the Jennings Run Sewage Project, which would open up an additional 3,000 acres in Menallen Township to development. That acreage is adjacent to the county business park that the commissioners have targeted as a high-priority item.

The NACO conference provides a chance for the county commissioners to meet with their state's senators. In the last two years, Vicites and Commissioner Sean M. Cavanagh have attended the conference and brought back more than \$2 million for the airport, Vicites said.

"It was a way for me to get in to see both of those senators (again), and I took full advantage of it," said Vicites. "Sen. Specter was very supportive. He said the timing was right ... they're going to formulate a new federal budget that will start in October."

Although Santorum was called away on official business, Vicites said he was able to meet with his appropriations director Jill Hershey. "(She) was very receptive as well. She listened intently to specifics about the request," said Vicites.

Although federal officials mentioned that the terrorist tragedy of Sept. 11 means that federal dollars are being allocated for different priorities, Vicites said he stressed the need for transportation and infrastructure money to help struggling economies like Fayette's.

A key part of his sales pitch was that the county, unlike in years and decades past, has taken steps to acquire the necessary matching funds to leverage federal dollars. He said this was accomplished by the county's own bond issue and its lining up of a line of credit from a Washington County bond pool.

"I stressed that we're committing the local dollars as well," said Vicites. "We've committed \$2 million to the airport for the 5 percent match (required at the local level). The 90 percent federal funding is what we need to make the project happen."

Vicites said he, Cavanagh and Commissioner Ronald M. Nehls have also committed \$750,00 in local funds to the county business park to aid with infrastructure development. He said that while he's pleased with the job that redevelopment authority Executive Director Raymond C. Polaski is doing, federal funds will help speed the park project greatly.

"In order to keep this momentum going, for development of these projects, we need money in each federal fiscal year," said Vicites. "Things are going well. But we need federal funding ... we have to push hard for every time of federal funding that we can get. I'm committed to lobbying every year, as the commissioners have done in the past."

Vicites said the current board of commissioners is firmly committed to the business park and airport runway projects - and for a change has the cash to back up its funding request.

"It's not that we're asking for a handout. We have (some) funding on a local level," said Vicites. "There's always a match (requirement). And we could never meet the match in the past. Now we can. We have a master plan for each of these sites. It's very detailed; it's very organized. We're moving forward, step by step. (But) funding each fiscal year is critical to the success of each of these projects."

Vicites said that when he helped secure \$2 million worth of state funding for Fayette County a number of years back, the county couldn't take advantage of that revenue stream because it lacked the ability to provide the 50 percent match. As a result, all of that state money went to Fay-Penn Economic Development Council, which was able to provide the matching funds and used the state help to develop a technology park on Route 119.

"I would have preferred that \$1 million go to each (park)," said Vicites. "(But) because the county didn't have the match for the county business park, the \$2 million total went to the (Fay-Penn) technology park."

Vicites said that Cavanagh and Nehls were unable to attend this year's NACO conference, so he carried forth the county's request.

"We have to cover for each other. I was more than willing to go and take an active part and take the lead role in the legislative lobbying effort this year," said Vicites.

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