

COLTS restarting project

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The authority that oversees Lackawanna County's transit system ditched the architectural plans for a bus station in downtown Scranton on Thursday, one week after the botched project was cited as an example of public corruption in a federal indictment against county Commissioner A.J. Munchak and former Commissioner Robert C. Cordaro.

The authority officially jettisoned its old plans, which cost more than \$900,000, and announced it instead wanted to build an "environmentally friendly" building costing \$12 million to \$14 million.

If everything goes according to plan, the proposed station, called an intermodal center, will be open in about two years, said Robert Fiume, the executive director of the County of Lackawanna Transit System.

"I think we are on track now and headed in the right direction," Mr. Fiume said. "We are going to move forward. We are cleaning up the mess."

Mr. Fiume was referring to the circumstances surrounding how Highland Associates of Clarks Summit was paid more than \$900,000 in a no-bid process that violated federal rules. COLTS had to pay back the \$900,000-plus in federal funds it used to hire Highland for the plans for the project that was never built.

"It's a total shame what had happened," Mr. Fiume said.

COLTS has already repaid \$250,000, Mr. Fiume said, and it is on a three-year payment plan to pay the rest of the money out of the federal funds COLTS receives annually.

Because COLTS was forced to pay back the money it got from the Federal Transit Administration, and now has to hire a company for new designs, Mr. Fiume said, "I guess we are paying for design (work) twice."

Mr. Fiume said there was nothing precluding Highland Associates from submitting a proposal for the new building.

But until like the first time, when Highland was handpicked for the project under the administration of Mr. Cordaro and Mr. Munchak, Mr. Fiume said COLTS will advertise the project locally and nationally, probably in about two weeks. Construction could start in the fall, he said.

"This is an open and fair competition," Mr. Fiume said. "We will follow the federal guidelines to the T. We are going to do what's right for the people of Lackawanna County."

The intermodal center is a key piece in the jigsaw-like puzzle of public corruption laid out in the 40-count indictment returned against Mr. Cordaro and Mr. Munchak. Mr. Cordaro, who is a lawyer, and Mr. Munchak, who has vowed to stay in office, each have pleaded not guilty and have said they expect to be acquitted at trial.

According to the indictment, three principals of a company referred to only as "Company 3," which is clearly a reference to Highland, made \$90,000 in payments -- allegedly \$60,000 to Mr. Munchak and \$30,000 to Mr. Cordaro -- "in anticipation of receiving additional county contracts."

The indictment states Mr. Cordaro used his influence as majority commissioner to have COLTS terminate the contract it had with the company that was on the job before the work was given to Highland. Last month, the FBI asked COLTS for copies of some of its records.

"We want to move forward, we want to clean everything up and we want a redesigned facility and make it green," Mr. Fiume said.

The new building, which will provide access to bus, taxicab and eventually train transportation, will be in the 100 block

of Lackawanna Avenue next to the General Services Administration building where GSA employees currently park.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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