

OUR OPINION

Make strong case for transit hub

Administration to spend old earmarks

Money "earmarked" for transportation projects itself is about to move.

Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said Friday that nearly \$500 million designated over the last decade for transportation projects, through earmarks by members of Congress, will be redistributed unless the money is used for its intended purposes.

The policy makes good sense. At a time when unemployment is persistent and states can't find enough money for a large backlog of highway and bridge work, it's reasonable to transfer funds from projects that have been stalled for other reasons.

Of about \$475 million of unused earmarks, Pennsylvania would be able to transfer about \$29 million to other projects that are ready to go but for funding.

That makes it all the more important for the County of Lackawanna Transit System to make a compelling case for the long-delayed intermodal transit hub planned for Lackawanna Avenue.

The project, slated for a state government-owned parking lot on Lackawanna Avenue adjacent to the Mall at Steamtown and the Steamtown National Historic Site, would create a central terminal for interstate and local buses, cabs and, eventually, passenger rail service.

About \$3 million for the \$12 million project was earmarked more than a decade ago. Since then, however, the project has been slowed by site-acquisition issues and corruption — part of the successful federal case against former Lackawanna County Commissioners Robert Cordaro and A.J. Munchak dealt with the illegal award of a design contract for the hub to Highland Associates of Clarks Summit. Because of that illegal award, the county has had to refund nearly \$1 million to the federal government.

COLTS has said that substantial progress has been made to rectify the problems that have slowed the project. Sen. Bob Casey has said that Mr. LaHood will send an inspection team to Scranton. It's crucial that COLTS be ready to make the strongest possible case for the project so that the federal funds are kept for their intended purpose, a project that is important to downtown Scranton's development and the long-term prospects for the return of passenger rail service.