

Regional highway group taking shape

Columbus-Pittsburgh Corridor Committee ready to put on pressure

By **PAUL GIANNAMORE**

Business editor

NEWCOMERSTOWN — Economic development representatives, county commissioners, business leaders and others from a seven-county region stretching from Franklin County to Jefferson County are pushing ahead with efforts to have a four-lane highway connect-

ing Columbus to Pittsburgh built.

The Columbus-Pittsburgh Corridor Committee met at the Hampton Inn off I-77 Friday morning with about 35 people in attendance. The group heard much about the Ohio Department of Transportation's interpretation of the state budget and its impact on projects that aren't in the construction phase.

The group wants a highway

stretching from Columbus to U.S. Route 22 to provide a more direct link to Pittsburgh than exists today with congested Interstate 70 and I-79.

Rick Platt, executive director of the Heath-Newark-Licking County Port Authority, a former director of Jefferson County's Progress Alliance economic development group, said of the 160 miles, about

40 miles remain to be completed.

Representatives from along the corridor stressed the economic development needs the highway could meet.

The corridor involves state Route 161 from I-270 to state Route 16 at Newark and over to U.S. Route 36 near Coshocton. Route 36 goes

See **HIGHWAY** Page 7A ↔

from four lanes to two for a stretch east of Newcomerstown. East of Urichsville, area officials are looking at a stretch currently served by two-lane U.S. Route 250 to U.S. Route 22 west of Cadiz.

Sandie Mapel, technical study director of the Licking County Area Transportation Study, said the state Route 161—I-270 interchange in Northeast Columbus is the gateway to the corridor. The interchange improvement project is 91 percent complete. Work to complete a four-lane highway from I-270 to Cherry Valley Road in western Licking County will be finished by the end of 2009, she said.

Dave Brenner of State Farm Insurance said the traffic light at Cherry Valley Road is there for safety, but it stops traffic on a busy road that includes 1,000 State Farm operations center workers who commute between Newark and New Albany. Brenner said he's taken "a siege mentality" about making the highway project happen.

T.J. Justice, executive director of the Coshocton Port Authority, said while the four-lane section of state Route 16 that would be part of the corridor is completed to Dresden, ODOT has recently said construction of an eight-mile portion from there to near Coshocton has slipped from construction in 2012 to 2014. He indicated the project hasn't moved to the design phase and only preliminary work can be done until ODOT is ready to spend the money.

Tony Guida, a Steubenville Realtor who has taken on participation in the highway project as an economic development issue, told the group how ODOT had proceeded to hiring a consulting engineer for a section of highway from Newcomerstown to Cadiz, but canceled the contract days before an announce-

ment was to be made in July.

He noted \$550,000 was earmarked federally for the study by former Congressman Bob Ney and by Gov. Ted Strickland when he was in the House of Representatives. He said ODOT has indicated it will not spend money on future projects until so-called Tier I projects (those with funding secured or already in construction) are completed.

State Sen. Joy Padgett, R-Coshocton, said ODOT is misinterpreting the budget it was sent from the General Assembly.

"This interpretation is something they have exaggerated," she said. "We said they should not take money from a Tier I project and go and pick and choose other projects. The budget does not say a single word about not moving forward on Tier II projects. It is an interpretation by ODOT that is not accurate."

She suggested the corridor committee request resolutions from the seven counties along the highway route, as well as from every municipality in the area to send to the governor. Also, she suggested businesses with freight operations along the route write letters explaining how their efficiency would improve. The steering committee has a commitment from Paul Prater of American Electric Power to put together a white paper from businesses along the route explaining what the highway could mean to economic development.

"Every time you come into contact with an ODOT person, you have to say the same thing," she said.

Platt said the steering committee needs "to be singing out of the same page of the same hymnal" on the highway issue. There are several projects, but the interests all along the corridor would be best served by the completion of all the projects, Guida said.

Justice presented the group with a set of proposed organization statements and bylaws patterned after a steering committee that worked for 40 years to have U.S. 35 built as a limited-access highway across the southern tier of Ohio.

Padgett said she wants to wait another month or so before taking the highway corridor issue to Strickland because the governor's office is tied down on working on electricity deregulation now.

She said it took 20 years to get the four-lane section of U.S. Route 36 built around Coshocton, even though the right-of-way had been purchased.

A longer effort is the four-lane construction of approximately three miles of U.S. Route 22 between the expressway at Cadiz and the expressway at the Jewett interchange. Phil Madzia, a Harrison County commissioner, said money for the project had been set aside decades ago when Douglas Applegate was representing the area in Congress. There was talk of diverting the money to building a strip from Cadiz to I-70 at St. Clairsville, but neither project has occurred, though some funding is available, he said.

"We need to go in force to go into the governor's office and be forceful. The more we become forceful, the more they are going to listen," said State Rep. John Domenick, D-Smithfield.

Domenick said he understands that ODOT doesn't want to waste limited money, but he said no project can move forward unless the first step is taken, as in the case of the corridor study from Newcomerstown to Cadiz.

"It's not just little Steubenville or little Cadiz or Coshocton coming. It's the whole area. Strickland, can't you see what we want to do with this? He says he

wants to 'Turnaround Ohio.' That's a pretty phrase, but it won't be in four years if they keep on doing this," he said.

Licking County Commissioner Doug Smith suggested the group reach out for support from Western Pennsylvania, which is the other end of the corridor.

"We all have to assume some stewardship for the entire corridor," Smith said.

Justice said the bylaws and organizational paper would address keeping the committee working together from one end of the corridor to the other, with areas continuing to participate even after their local projects are completed.

The group will meet again Nov. 16 in Newcomerstown. Among items to be discussed are a possible bus trip across the highway corridor, with stops in each county and in areas where the highway projects are taking place. Platt suggested the bus trip could end in Columbus with the group meeting with state officials.

Votes were taken on a choice of a logo for the corridor group.

(Giannamore can be contacted at pgiannamore@heraldstaronline.com.)