



Corridor committee coming together

Group aims to complete
highway link between
Columbus to Pittsburgh

By **PAUL GIANNAMORE**
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NEWCOMERSTOWN — The Columbus-Pittsburgh Corridor Steering Committee approved bylaws and began work toward formalizing the committee during a meeting Friday morning at the Hampton Inn.

T.J. Justice, executive director of the Coshocton County Port Authority, and David Brenner, zone resources manager for the State Farm Insurance Co. at the

COMMITTEE CHAIRMEN — David Brenner, left, a State Farm insurance executive, and T.J. Justice, executive director of the Coshocton County Port Authority, have been named co-chairmen of the Columbus-Pittsburgh Corridor Steering Committee. The group met at the Hampton Inn, Newcomerstown, Friday and began formalizing the committee structure. The group's goal is to push for completion of expressway sections of several highways to complete a direct freeway link between Columbus and Pittsburgh. The route would include the sections of U.S. Route 22 in Harrison and Jefferson counties.

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regional office in Newark, were named co-chairmen of the committee.

Brenner thanked Rick Platt, executive director of the Licking County Port Authority, for his efforts in putting together the initial meetings of the group, which wants Ohio to complete a four-lane highway link between Columbus and Pittsburgh. The road network would include the U.S. Route 22 expressway between Cadiz and Steubenville, and on into West Virginia and Pittsburgh as the final part of the highway.

Platt had been talking about the potential for the highway network when he was executive director of Jefferson County's Progress Alliance economic development organization several years ago, and continued to push to put together the seven-county alliance to push for the highway.

Brenner emphasized that the highway can benefit communities all along the route.

He said he chairs the downtown Newark revitalization group and his community has "architectural treasures" that can be attractive for business and tourism.

"Nothing happens in a vacuum. It all ties together. The implications for related developments along this corridor are good for commerce and business," he said.

As of today, much of the highway network is already built into four-lane, limited-access roads, but there are portions remaining to be completed. Among work to be completed is a 28-mile link between Newcomerstown and

U.S. Route 22 at Cadiz. A federal earmark for a study of the project has been approved, but the Ohio Department of Transportation has stopped the award of a contract for the study. The highway would run between Tappan and Clendenning lakes from Newcomerstown to Cadiz.

A study that was under way for a four-lane expressway for state Route 16 from where the divided highway now ends at Dresden to the U.S. Route 36 expressway at Coshocton also has been halted.

Other projects needed to finish the link, which committee members say would open up east central Ohio for new economic development, include the relocation of an overloaded intersection west of Newark. Four-lane work on state Routes 161, 37 and 16 is under way between Newark and New Albany.

Also to be completed would be a three-mile stretch of U.S. Route 22 east of Cadiz to the Jewett interchange, which is two lanes. Money for that project was set aside in the late 1970s, according to Harrison County officials, but has been used for other purposes.

All told, about 41 miles remain to be completed to finish the highway link between the two metropolitan areas, providing a direct drive between Pittsburgh and Columbus and alleviating traffic on congested I-70 between Columbus and Washington, Pa., where Pittsburgh-bound traffic moves onto I-79.

The group was updated on a meeting in December

between officials and John Haseley, chief of staff for Gov. Ted Strickland. The meeting included state Sens. Joy Padgett, R-Coshocton, and Jason Wilson, D-Columbiana, as well as other officials. Justice said Padgett has indicated there is some movement on the sticking points on funding for the studies of the Coshocton and the Newcomerstown-Cadiz links.

The Ohio Department of Transportation has said language in the state's biennial budget passed last year indicates money cannot be spent on projects that have not already been committed to the construction phase. Under that interpretation, funding for the studies for the 10-mile Dresden-Coshocton and the 28-mile Newcomerstown-Cadiz links has been stopped. The corridor study on the Ohio 16 Dresden-Coshocton link already had begun, and the Newcomerstown-Cadiz link was halted on the eve of a press conference in July when a study consultant was to be named and a contract awarded.

Realtor Anthony Guida of Steubenville, who is one of Jefferson County's representatives on the steering committee, said, "I can see no reason why we cannot get that study done."

Padgett has indicated she would be willing to work to change the budget language to ease ODOT's concerns. Officials who were at the meeting indicated there is some potential movement to come from the Strickland administration to free up the funding.

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Justice told the group he would be forwarding a data-gathering form he's been using to help develop information about business and industries and investment along the highway corridor to other county representatives on the steering committee. Paul Prater of American Electric Power will be developing a business white paper to present to state government about the business interests along the highway corridor.

County commissioners from Licking, Coshocton, Muskingum, Tuscarawas, Harrison and Jefferson counties have named members to the steering committee. They include:

- Jefferson County — Guida and Edward Florak, interim director of Progress Alliance.

- Harrison County — Brent Walrath of Cadiz Insurance and County Engineer Robert Sterling.

- Tuscarawas County — Commissioner Chris Abbuhl and the executive of the county's Community Improvement Corp., to be named.

- Coshocton County — Justice and Prater.

- Muskingum County — Jerry Nolder, executive director of the Zanesville-Muskingum Port Authority and Mike Burnett of the Longaberger Corp.

- Licking County — Brenner and Sandie Mapel of the Licking County Area Transportation Study.

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