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## Partnership might be key to funding corridor Committee seeks Columbus-to-Pittsburgh route

By KENT MALLETT

Advocate Reporter

NEWARK -- A limited-access, divided highway connecting Columbus and Pittsburgh will take a seven-county united front and possibly alternative financing methods, organizers say.

Completion of the Ohio 161/37 expansion project from Columbus to Granville in 2009 will leave about 40 miles of the 160-mile corridor between the major markets on narrow roads with more access points and traffic lights.

The Columbus-Pittsburgh Corridor Steering Committee met Friday at State Farm Insurance, where more than 30 government, business and transportation representatives from central and eastern Ohio discussed the corridor goal.

A shortfall in state funds for road projects might prevent further work along the corridor until beyond 2015, so the seven-county partnership might be key to obtaining funds for all the projects along the route.

"We know the outcome if we did nothing; it wouldn't happen at all," said Rick Platt, executive director of the Heath-Newark-Licking County Port Authority. "It can be so much more than a commuter highway. It can generate much more economic activity in our county and region if it's part of a corridor."

Four gaps remain in the corridor:

- The Ohio 16-Cherry Valley Road intersection and traffic light in Granville, which would be eliminated with a \$62 million interchange just east of the current intersection.
- A 10-mile stretch on Ohio 16 from Ohio 60 to Coshocton, which would be improved with a \$117 million upgrade.
- A 28-mile stretch from Newcomerstown to Cadiz on U.S. 36 and U.S. 250 or a new route;
- About two miles just east of Cadiz on U.S. 22.

The Cherry Valley intersection and 10 miles of Ohio 16 remain on the Ohio Department of Transportation's Tier II, a category for projects under active development but without guaranteed construction funding.

The other two projects have not been approved by the state's Transportation Review Advisory Council, which schedules future road projects in Ohio.

Two possible funding methods mentioned at Friday's meeting were a Tax Increment Financing district or payment of tolls.

"The biggest issue is where to get construction financing from," said Sandra Mapel, technical study director for the Licking County Area Transportation Study.

Paul Prater, of American Electric Power, said the state's apparent commitment to improving the Interstate 70/71 split in Columbus and Interstate 90 east of Cleveland could leave the rest out in the cold.

"Those two projects will suck money out of everything else in the state," Prater said.

Platt said he doesn't view the effort as a fight against Cleveland and Columbus, and the corridor project could obtain funds even if the big-city projects are funded.

Dave Brenner, State Farm Insurance zone resources manager, said he thinks funding can be obtained from some source if the representatives involved remain united.

"The first thing is to develop a unifying purpose, meaning we are all going to stick together, collectively, to get all the projects to take place," Brenner said. "Our effort is all about the project recognized as having an impact on Ohio's economy. We have such a broad base of support from this type of development."

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