

## Highway committee gets attention from ODOT

By PAUL GIANNAMORE, business editor

STEBENVILLE — The Ohio Department of Transportation is taking an active role in the Columbus-Pittsburgh Corridor Steering Committee.

The group, which includes representatives of seven counties stretching from Jefferson to Franklin counties, is seeking the completion of 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.

The group held its latest meeting Friday at the State Farm Insurance regional offices in Newark.

Local Realtor Anthony Guida; Edward Florak, interim director of the Progress Alliance economic development organization; and David Skiviat, vice president at the Franciscan University of Steubenville, attended the session. Guida and Florak are Jefferson County's appointees to serve on the steering committee.

The three men reported ODOT is showing an interest in the steering committee's work and had representatives at the session for the first time since the group started holding regular meetings last fall.

Dick Bible, deputy director for ODOT's District 11 office in New Philadelphia, has posted information about ODOT's views on a study for a portion of the Columbus-Pittsburgh corridor, which would extend the existing and planned four-lane highway network through eastern Tuscarawas County and across Harrison County to the existing U.S. Route 22 expressway near Cadiz.

ODOT had been ready to announce a consultant was hired to do the study last summer but called off a formal announcement. ODOT put a \$500,000 set-aside of federal money for the study on hold, saying the state's new budget prevented transportation officials from spending money on any highway project that was not in or near construction.

Bible, in his bi-monthly district director's newsletter, available on the ODOT District 11 Web site, notes strong local support for the road link from Jefferson County and Steubenville, where Guida has been spearheading efforts for release of the federal dollars. The steering committee formed in part out of a meeting put together in part by Guida last summer after ODOT called off hiring the consultant for the study.

Bible said Gannett Fleming, a consulting firm, had submitted a proposal for about \$300,000 for the feasibility study to ascertain the purpose and need for the highway and research on conditions and traffic conditions and projections, along with deficiencies in the local highways and demands for future transportation.

Bible said rough estimates for the 28-mile highway link run between \$500 million and \$1 billion and much of the highway would run through the Muskingum Watershed Conservancy District, presenting right-of-way challenges. The highway link could run between Tappan and Clendenning lakes.

He said ODOT wants to balance spending on projects beyond the current major new construction program, in recognition that studies done now won't advance highways to construction in the short term.

Skiviat said ODOT's presentation, including comments from District 5 Planning Program Administrator Julie Gwinn, at the meeting explained that the state is concerned with getting too detailed with studies now for highways that might not be ready to be built until years later, when current data and studies would be out of date.

Bible's message says ODOT now is prepared to spend all of the \$500 million in the federal earmark to expand the study's scope, including development of a better construction cost estimate; exploration of alternative financing possibilities including private financing and tolls; environmental screening and economic development assessment, including provision of data on industry; employment; and population in the area around the proposed road alignment.

The steering committee is in the process of developing its own research on industries and businesses along the corridor from Columbus to Pittsburgh.

Skiviat said ODOT has reported it will take about two months to update the contract and about 18 months to perform the study, meaning it could be ready in late 2009.

Among alternatives could be to look at completing the link from the expressway near Dennison to Route 22 at Cadiz as a so-called "super 2" highway, essentially half of a four-lane limited access freeway. Traffic would still have limited access and truck climbing and passing lanes would be built in hilly areas, but it would not be a full four-lane highway.

Bible said assessing the cost of a super 2 would be a reasonable use of researching alternatives in determining the cost of the

project.

Skiviat said state Sen. Joy Padgett, R-Coshocton, reported that she and state Sen. Steve Buehrer, R-Delta, chairman of the Senate transportation committee, are planning to clarify budget language to ease ODOT's fears of spending on planning for future highway projects.

Guida said he's excited by ODOT's response so far.

"The possibility of tolls or a super 2 is a viable way to get this thing going," Guida said.

"When you consider what shape the state and federal budgets are in to do new highways, it's a viable alternative."

The Longaberger Baskets company will host the next scheduled meeting of the steering committee, scheduled for April 25 at either the Longaberger offices or at the company's golf course, Guida said.

Skiviat said he's offered to allow the university to host the June meeting of the steering committee, which Guida said could coincide with the "Corridors of Opportunity" program of the Pittsburgh Business Times, scheduled to be held June 12. The program will bring many real estate and business developers from Western Pennsylvania to look at opportunities for growth and business in Jefferson County and Eastern Ohio.

The group has decided to begin meeting every other month instead of monthly.

Much of the Columbus-Pittsburgh highway corridor, viewed by officials across the region as a transportation alternative to the congested Interstate 70 in Eastern Ohio, already has been built into a four-lane, limited-access highway network. Portions remaining to be completed in addition to the 28 miles to be studied, include completion of a study for a four-lane state Route 16 from where the divided highway ends at Dresden to the U.S. Route 36 expressway at Coshocton, as well as work to relocate an overloaded intersection west of Newark.

Four-lane work on state Routes 161, 37 and 16 is under way between Newark and New Albany, and the improvement of the I-270/Route 161 interchange at New Albany northeast of Columbus recently was completed.

As of today, the corridor includes the two-lane stretch of U.S. Route 250 from Cadiz to Newcomerstown, where the U.S. Route 36 expressway begins.

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Section: News    Date Posted: 2/20/2008