

COLUMBUS BUSINESS FIRST

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Bucking the odds, backers push for Columbus-to-Pittsburgh highway

Business First of Columbus - by [Jeff Bell](#) Business First

A seven-county partnership is pushing for development of a Columbus-to-Pittsburgh highway corridor despite the daunting financial and political challenges facing the idea.

Such an effort between public and private sources is essential considering the economic benefits that would come from the creation of a corridor and its importance to the communities along it, said Rick Platt, executive director of the Heath-Newark-Licking County Port Authority.

"This would connect Pittsburgh and Columbus in an unprecedented way," he said. "It would truly be multimodal - highway, rail and air."

International airports are in place in Pittsburgh and Columbus, and the cities are connected by rail lines. The only breaks in the chain, Platt said, are about 40 miles of two-lane highway in Ohio along a 160-mile route that runs to West Virginia's northern panhandle and western Pennsylvania.

"A four-lane highway that goes to two lanes might as well be a dead end," he said.

The expansion would give Central Ohio a more direct four-lane route to Pittsburgh than Interstate 70, Platt said.

But the problem, said Platt and others involved in the new Columbus-Pittsburgh Corridor Committee, is persuading Ohio policymakers to fund the project. Its price tag could exceed \$1 billion, according to some estimates, and it comes at a time of heightened competition for highway development dollars as the **Ohio Department of Transportation** wrestles with stagnant funding and skyrocketing construction costs.

The 17-member corridor committee was formed in January by elected officials and business executives along the route in Ohio. It includes at least two representatives from each of the seven counties along the corridor. Members from Franklin County have yet to be appointed.

Major road blocks

The Columbus-to-Pittsburgh corridor starts at the I-270/Route 161 interchange near New Albany, but the rest of the route runs through small towns and rural areas. From New Albany, it follows Routes 161 and 16 through Licking County, picks up Route 36 in Coshocton, jogs onto Route 250 near Uhrichsville in Tuscarawas County and joins Route 22 in Cadiz in Harrison County.

From there, it's four lanes the rest of the way on Route 22 to Pittsburgh except for a 3-mile stretch east of Cadiz. The only other stretches of two-lane road are 28 miles between Cadiz and Newcomerstown in Tuscarawas County and 10 miles between Dresden in Muskingum County and Coshocton.

The 28-mile stretch along Routes 36 and 250 is the most problematic, said Ohio Rep. John Domenick, D-

Smithfield, whose district sits along the Ohio River. A section of Route 250 runs next to Tappan Dam and Lake in Harrison County.

"That's a major obstacle," Domenick said. "How do you go around Tappan without spending a bundle? That's what the study will show."

He was referring to a long-discussed feasibility study of a four-lane highway through that area. The study became a rallying point for the eastern Ohio counties last summer, when the state Department of Transportation balked at starting the examination even though \$500,000 from the federal government had been earmarked for the work.

The issue, said ODOT spokesman Scott Varner, was the likelihood the study would sit idle because the state lacks the money to start construction.

ODOT said in November that funding issues and rising construction costs have resulted in a projected shortfall of \$3.5 billion for major construction through 2015.

The department also is under pressure from legislators to complete construction on top-tier highway projects already promised before it embarks on newer, second-tier ones such as the two-lane gaps in the Columbus-to-Pittsburgh corridor.

"We knew within the administration that there will not be money for construction for many years," Varner said of the 28-mile section of Routes 36 and 250. "You're talking a new highway through a very rural area where there could be many environmental issues."

But facing heat from communities along the Columbus-to-Pittsburgh corridor, ODOT agreed in January to use the federal money for an in-depth study of the 28-mile stretch of highway.

The study's purpose is to better understand the economic development potential and environmental challenges of expanding the road, Varner said.

"That was the first real significant accomplishment of our corridor committee," said T.J. Justice, committee co-chairman and executive director of the Coshocton County Port Authority.

One of the next steps, Justice said, is to get officials from Franklin County more active in the committee's work.

State Rep. Larry Flowers, R-Canal Winchester, said he is not familiar with the efforts of the corridor committee. Instead, he and other members of the Franklin County delegation in the House and Senate are focused on Central Ohio issues such as the \$1 billion-plus reconstruction of the Interstate 70/71 split in Columbus and improvements to Route 33 from Groveport into Fairfield County, said Flowers, the Republicans' majority leader in the House and a member of a House subcommittee that reviews highway funding.

"When I think about a Columbus-to-Pittsburgh highway," he said, "we would be talking about multiple phases and multiple years out. It's not something that would happen in even a couple budget years."

At the same time, Flowers said he recognizes the importance of such a highway. He praised the counties active in the proposal for taking a regional approach.

Domenick, serving his third term in the House, said he understands the political realities facing rural areas when competing for highway construction money against metropolitan areas such as Columbus, Cleveland and Cincinnati.

"The big boys get the dollars," he said. "What's left goes to the rural areas. The game's not fair, but life's not fair. We're certainly not giving up."

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