

Highway corridor case made before Senate

By PAUL GIANNAMORE

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COLUMBUS — Without a solid highway plan, Ohio's turnaround could end up being a full circle, ending up where it is today.

That was the leadoff of testimony by Rick Platt, executive director of the Heath-Newark-Licking County Port Authority, to the Ohio Senate Highways and Transportation Committee Tuesday, trying to drum up support of the Pittsburgh-to-Columbus high-

way corridor.

The route, which would include the U.S. Route 22 freeway through Jefferson and Harrison counties, is the topic for a group of officials and representatives of government and business in counties stretching along the

route from Franklin to Jefferson counties. Platt has been pushing for a highway connecting the communities at least since he was director of Jefferson County's Progress Alliance economic

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development organization several years ago.

In an interview Wednesday, Platt said he felt a certain kinship to senators on the committee, including Joy Padgett, R-Coshocton, who is trying to push the Senate for language clarifying how the Ohio Department of Transportation can spend its current budget. Platt said he also was before state Sen. Jason Wilson, D-Columbiana, who supports the highway corridor, as well as senators from around the state from places where he and his family have lived.

"I think our message was that it's important when Ohio is looking at projects not just to take a stance on urban projects but on projects that are of benefit to all of Ohio — underlining 'all,'" Platt said.

Padgett has explained that ODOT is interpreting language in last year's transportation budget as saying it cannot spend money on major new projects other than those already under construction. ODOT had even delayed spending a federal set-aside for a study on completion of a highway link across Harrison County that would be part of the proposed highway corridor.

Platt's testimony noted the seven-county coalition that wants to complete the

160-mile highway link. He said only four key projects remain and would take as little as \$500 million in investment.

"The urban aspects of this corridor are complete," Platt testified. "It's now time to finish this important corridor to help stimulate the turnaround of Ohio."

"One of the barriers to achieving ODOT's ability to begin to work on the highway projects it needs in order to turn around Ohio is, apparently, a clause in last year's transportation budget. I don't care if the General Assembly intended one thing and ODOT interpreted another," he said.

Platt said ODOT and the state Senate have to work together to advance projects to improve the state's economic competitiveness, including suburban and rural areas, embraces not only rail, river and aviation but also highway needs and ensures the entire state benefits.

The Columbus-to-Pittsburgh Corridor committee will meet April 25 at the Longaberger golf course in Nashport.

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