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East Ohio pushes Columbus-to-Pittsburgh link

Pittsburgh Business Times - by [Jeff Bell](#)

Seven counties in eastern Ohio are pushing for development of a Columbus-to-Pittsburgh highway 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.

Major road blocks

From Columbus, the 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.

East of 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, a Smithfield Democrat 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."

FUNDING STUDY

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.

But State Rep. Larry Flowers, a Republican from Canal Winchester, said 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.

"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."

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