

Highway group holds meeting

By **PAUL GIANNAMORE**
Business editor

STEUBENVILLE — Last July, a group that was ready for an announcement of a highway impact study met at Jefferson Community College to discuss next steps in completion of a four-lane expressway linking directly between Pittsburgh and Columbus because the study was put on hold.

That group started with a mission and has grown to dozens of interested parties in seven counties stretching from Steubenville to Columbus, formalizing its operations as the Columbus to Pittsburgh Corridor Committee, which held a meeting Friday morning at the Franciscan University of Steubenville.

In the ensuing months, the group has, with the help of interested state legislators, pushed a change in state law governing how the Ohio Department of Transportation pays for projects, helped



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MAKING A POINT — Tony Guida, third from left, a Steubenville Realtor and leading local proponent of the Columbus to Pittsburgh highway committee, makes a point during Friday's highway corridor committee meeting at the Franciscan University of Steubenville. Listening are, from left, Licking County Commissioner Tim Bubb; Ed Looman, executive director of Progress Alliance; and Julie Gwinn of the Ohio Department of Transportation.

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push for release of the \$500,000 federal allotment for the study of a highway from Cadiz to Newcomerstown and attracted attention along the corridor.

The group wants to see the 28-mile link between Cadiz and Newcomerstown built, as well as improving a stretch of state Route 16 between Dresden and Coshocton to a four-lane highway. Also, an interchange in Licking County at Cherry Valley on state Route 16 must be designed and built. Also on the list is completing the four-lane U.S. Route 22 through Harrison County. A couple of miles between the Jewett interchange and Cadiz are still two lanes.

About 35 people met at the J.C. Williams Center at the university, including representatives from Franklin, Licking, Muskingum, Coshocton, Tuscarawas, Harrison and Jefferson counties.

The committee discussed a change in the state transportation funding bill that was championed by state Sen. Joy Padgett, R-Coshocton; Sen. Jason Wilson, R-Columbiana; and Sen. Steve Buehrer, R-Delta, head of the Senate transportation committee.

The new law attempts to make it clear that ODOT can expend money for planning on projects that are not in the Tier I category as identified by the state Transportation Review Advisory Council. ODOT had contended it held up spending the federal earmark on the study of the 28-mile link from Cadiz to Newcomerstown because language in the state transportation budget indicated money couldn't be spent unless highway projects were in Tier I and close to, or in, construction.

Chris Gagin, represent-

ing U.S. Rep. Charlie Wilson, D-St. Clairsville, questioned if the transportation budget amendment still leaves it up to ODOT to decide which projects are far enough along to fund.

The group decided to have co-chairmen T.J. Justice, executive director of the Coshocton County Port Authority, and David Brenner of State Farm Insurance, write to ODOT Director James Beasley asking what needs to be done to be sure money gets spent on planning projects.

"You have the enabling legislation. Where does this put us?" Justice said.

He and ODOT officials at Friday's meeting noted an environmental study that was under way on improving state Route 16 from Dresden to Coshocton was stopped by ODOT and has not been revived. The federal earmark for the Cadiz to Newcomerstown link has been released. Gannett Fleming has been hired as the consultant and is beginning the planning process, expected to take until the end of October 2009.

The letter also will be sent to Gov. Ted Strickland and officials in his administration, as well as state legislators along the highway route.

Julie Gwinn of ODOT District 5 said there were two issues for ODOT — the legislation and the availability of funds.

"That problem still exists," she said.

Gwinn explained that environmental studies for highway projects are only good for three years. If planning and construction haven't moved forward, the studies have to be "re-evaluated," which can be simple for smaller projects or major efforts if it's for something extensive, such as miles of express-

way or a major interchange as that proposed at Cherry Valley, west of Newark.

Brenner said the Cherry Valley project is unique in that the state already owns most of the property that would be needed to build the interchange.

"We can say indefinitely that funding won't be there," Brenner said. "If we don't start down the path, we never will find funding."

Dee Grossman-Tasker, executive director of the Tuscarawas County Convention and Visitors Bureau, representing Tuscarawas County Commissioner Chris Abbuhl, said the highway committee should work with the 21st Century Transportation Priorities Task Force in developing economic impact studies, to avoid duplicating work.

Justice distributed a proposed economic development assessment form that the committee will use to help prove the impact and potential the highway carries. He also suggested committee members and interested parties visit the 21st Century Transportation Priorities Task Force page on the Internet and submit comments about the

importance of the corridor.

Also in attendance were West Virginia state Sen. Ed Bowman, D-Weirton, along with Weirton businessmen Jim Guida and Dan Guida.

"There is no project anywhere in West Virginia that would have the significance for economic development for the Northern Panhandle than this project here," Bowman said.

Dan Guida said officials in Allegheny County have been made aware of the corridor committee.

In other business:

- The committee is developing a list of alternate members to allow steady progression in membership as time goes by, as well as trying to name four at-large members.

- A bylaws subcommittee including Gagin; Sandie Mapel, who is transportation planner for the Licking County Area Transportation Study; and Cadiz businessman Brent Walrath, will report at the next meeting on bylaws changes.

- The committee received an update on payment of \$50 annual dues. So far, payment has

been received from the Coshocton Port Authority, Harrison County, the Heath-Newark-Licking County Port Authority, Progress Alliance, the Tuscarawas County Commissioners and Woolrath. Jefferson County Commissioner Thomas Graham said the county needed an invoice from the group.

- The committee set Sept. 19 as the next meeting date, possibly at Harrison Community Hospital.

Those in attendance Friday included:

State Sen. Jason Wilson; Justice; Brenner; Rick Platt, director of the Port Authority of Licking County; Jerry Nolder of the Zanesville-Muskingum County Port Authority; Harrison County Commissioner Phil Madzia and County Engineer Robert Sterling; Ken Engstrom from the staff of U.S. Rep. Zack Space, D-Newark; Gwinn; Greg Guerney and Becky McCarty of ODOT Dis-

trict 11; Grossman-Tasker; Bowman; Steubenville Realtor Tony Guida; Ed Looman, executive director of Progress Alliance; Licking County Commissioner Tim Bubb; Walrath; Paul Prater of American Electric Power; Mapel; Gagin; Steubenville Mayor Domenick Mucci; Steubenville businessman and Realtor Domenick Teramana; Stacey Hazen of the Licking County Port Authority; Graham; local financial planner and stockbroker Ken Perkins; Steubenville 6th Ward Councilman David Lalich; local businesswoman Huberta Siciliano; David Skiviat of the Franciscan University of Steubenville; Dan and J.J. Guida; and Mike Paprocki and John Brown of the Brooke-Hancock-Jefferson Metropolitan Planning Commission.

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