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Wilson Hears Columbus-Pittsburgh Corridor Plan

By KAY SEDGMER

POSTED: September 20, 2008

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The Columbus-Pittsburgh Corridor Committee gathered with state Sen. Jason Wilson at Harrison Community Hospital on Friday.

The committee was organized in July 2007 with a mission to promote the construction of a four-lane, 160-mile corridor that would serve as a direct link between Columbus and Pittsburgh. Counties involved in the project include Harrison, Jefferson, Tuscarawas, Coshocton, Muskingum and Licking. The steering committee advocates for and coordinates efforts to complete five key improvement projects on Ohio 161, Ohio 16, Ohio 22 and U.S. 22 within the Columbus-to-Pittsburgh route.

Plans call for a 28-mile link in Ohio between Cadiz and Newcomerstown and for the improvement of a portion of Ohio 16 between Dresden and Coshocton to a four-lane highway. An interchange in Licking County on Ohio 16 near Cherry Valley is currently under way, while an interchange at Interstate 270, Ohio 161 and Ohio 16 is complete.

In addition, the group is pushing for the connection of a four-lane stretch of U.S. 22 between Hopedale and Cadiz.

Wilson, D-Columbiana, shared his thoughts on the importance of the corridor Friday.

As a member of the Ohio Highway and Transportation Committee, he said he had heard many comments on the state level that echoed those being made during the meeting.

"Eastern Ohio will benefit from the corridor," he said. "There's no question that private and public partners will be needed for the project to move ahead. Creative financing is also a factor."

He noted that Lt. Gov. Lee Fisher would be traveling to Eastern Ohio on Friday as well.

"When he comes to Wellsville today, I've asked him to travel Route 22 so he will be familiar with the area we are talking about," Wilson said. "Most people don't realize the importance of Route 22 and its economic future. We know that I-70 is nearing its capacity for traffic. We are not reinventing the wheel. This is really just common sense and it can be done."

Without a quorum, the committee was unable to handle any formal business, but members did discuss several topics, including repayment of federal funds rules. Co-Chairman David Brenner of Newark provided clarification of the repayment of federal funds rules relating to the project.

He and fellow co-chairman, T.J. Justice, have been in talks with representative from the Ohio Department of Transportation and although earmarked funds are required to be reimbursed to the federal government with a 10-year window, he said he believes there is a possibility for continuance of the project.

"This is not a deal killer," he said of correspondence requiring fund reimbursement to the federal government. "We are looking for the things that can help our friends at ODOT with financing. We are talking about ideas and resources."

Harrison County Commissioner Bill Host asked if the funds would need to be repaid on a local level, and Brenner said in the past only one project required repayment; the state handled that because local money wasn't available.

Brenner also noted that repayment is a clause put into an agreement by ODOT and is not part of the federal earmark.

Fact Box

- The next meeting of the Columbus-Pittsburgh Corridor Committee is scheduled for 10 a.m. Friday at Raven's Glen Winery on U.S. 36 near West Lafayette, Ohio. Open to the public, the meeting will feature a legislative candidates forum.

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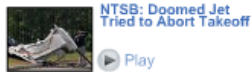
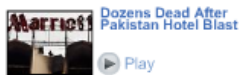
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Brenner and Justice have scheduled a meeting on the matter with Ohio Gov. Ted Strickland's chief of staff, John Haseley.

"It's important we maintain a presence in front of the Strickland administration," said Justice.

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