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## It's here! Phase 1 of 161 opens (video)

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NEW ALBANY — Licking Countians who have long awaited a divided highway connecting Newark and Columbus are halfway there.

Transportation planners, elected officials and community leaders braved a cold wind this morning on the Beech Road overpass of the new Ohio 161 for the official opening of the seven-mile section from Franklin County to Watkins Road in Licking County.

The ribbon-cutting opened the \$55.3 million first phase of the Ohio 161/37 widening and relocation project, which includes interchanges at Beech Road and Ohio 310. The second phase, from Watkins Road to the existing four-lane highway in Granville, is scheduled for completion in May 2010.

"This project has been a massive undertaking," said Bill Lindenbaum, ODOT District 5 deputy director. "More than two years ago, on a warmer, sunnier day, we broke ground. When we complete this entire project, we'll create a seamless link to business and travel in central Ohio."

The completed \$160 million, 13-mile roadway is expected to cut in half the travel time from Granville to Columbus. The Ohio 161/37 corridor carries 22,000 vehicles per day and is projected to have 65,000 by 2030.

"This improves safety and increases capacity, but on a more practical level, the people who drive it every day will have 30 more minutes to spend with their families," said Dennis Decker, division administrator of the Federal Highway Administration's Ohio office.

The new road will better connect workers to jobs, crops to market, goods to factories, and residents with health care, said ODOT spokesman Scott Varner.

"It's not just another transportation project," Varner said. "The corridor belongs to all in Licking County and Franklin County. We do more than cut a ribbon. We're forging a strong partnership."

The ceremony provided reason to celebrate the achievement but also an opportunity to push for highway improvements beyond the 13-mile widening project.

One major concern for many lies just a couple miles beyond the end of the second phase of the Ohio 161/37 improvements — at the Cherry Valley Road intersection with Ohio 16.

Local leaders have lobbied for an interchange replacing the congested intersection and traffic signal near the Granville-Newark border. Completing the Ohio 161/37 project will bring traffic, faster and uninterrupted, from Columbus to the Cherry Valley Road stoplight.

"We need to continue to work together to unclog that artery in this roadway," said U.S. Rep. Pat Tiberi, R-Westerville. "That is going to be a key part of this project."

Sandra Mapel, study director for the Licking County Area Transportation Study, looked even further than the Cherry Valley intersection.

"This is one step in a long hike in connecting the Columbus market and Pittsburgh market," Mapel said. "There's other segments along the way. Cherry Valley and Ohio 16 (intersection) will create a growing headache."

Mapel said it's also important to eventually connect an improved Thornwood Drive from Heath into Newark, connecting to the Cherry Valley interchange.

"I say 'interchange' because I have a dream it will be an interchange," Mapel said. "Licking County is directly connected in a way we haven't previously been to the Columbus market."

The Columbus-Pittsburgh Corridor Committee called the highway opening a big step toward the completion of Ohio's portion of a highway system connecting the major markets.

"This is a banner day and one that hopefully will catapult the remaining sections of the corridor to expedited planning," said corridor committee co-chairman T.J. Justice, who is executive director of the Coshocton Port Authority.

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