

# Question: To toll or not to toll

## Highway committee will gauge local leaders on funding concept

By **PAUL GIANNAMORE**  
Business editor

FRAZEYBURG — Members of the Columbus to Pittsburgh Corridor Committee left the Longaberger Golf Course Friday promising to gauge local political support for asking the Ohio Turnpike Commission to study making the proposed freeway network a toll road to pay for its construction.

About 40 members and interested parties attended the corridor committee's meeting to hear a presentation about highway funding

alternatives from Luther Liggett and Emmet Kelly of the law office Bricker and Eckler.

Liggett said the committee, which includes members from counties stretching from Franklin to Jefferson along state Routes 161 and 16, U.S. Routes 36 and 250 and 22, doesn't have to wait for federal or state government for a solution.

Liggett said under the 1950 legislation that formed the Ohio Turnpike Commission, any government representative from anywhere in

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## Group eyes alternatives to pay for roads

By **PAUL GIANNAMORE**  
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FRAZEYBURG — Even if the political will is willing, the budgets are weak, come stimulus or no, leaving alternative sources the most likely way to complete new highway projects in the future.

That was the message underlying a meeting of the Columbus to Pittsburgh Corridor Committee at the Longaberger Golf Course Friday morning.

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# Alternatives

FEB. 7, 2009

The Ohio Department of Transportation has been focusing, amid tight budgets, on completing projects already under construction and not spending on planning for future highways. ODOT's director recently changed with the retirement of James Beasley and his replacement by Jolene Molitoris. Officials from the corridor committee plan to meet with Molitoris to present the case for the highway which would use existing sections of state Routes 161 and 16, U.S. Routes 36, 250 and 22 as well as needing 28 miles of new construction from Cadiz to Dennison.

Hope for funding

through existing sources is waning.

Luther Liggett of the law firm of Brickler and Eckler, which handles government and public contracting, told the group that ODOT's money set aside in its budget for planning has gone from about 25 cents on the dollar to no money at all.

He said even if Ohio gets \$1 billion from the proposed Obama administration stimulus plan, no projects along the highway corridor are shovel-ready.

He said there are no changes in state law necessary to request the Ohio Turnpike Commission to get involved.

Liggett said state law

provides that any political subdivision or government agency may submit a written application asking for construction of a new turnpike. He provided the group with a sample resolution to distribute to local and county governments that could be used if there is interest in pursuing a toll road for the highway.

Liggett said it doesn't take complete agreement all along the corridor, either. Any single entity could make the request, though having a consensus makes the project more likely.

Under the state law, he said once a request is made, the turnpike commission could implement

a study on the feasibility of a new toll road and, if it is feasible, the commission would issue the bonds to pay for construction through its bonding authority. The Ohio Department of Transportation would handle working on designs and bidding out the project. He said there would be no local costs for studying the highway proposal.

Another potential way to work on completing projects that would link

Columbus to Pittsburgh with a direct expressway network include a proposal in the Ohio transportation bill called Transportation Innovation Authorities. Under the legislation, a region could band together to form such an authority to work with ODOT to use new financing tools, including tolls, to construct new or complete proposed highway projects.

Becky McCarty of ODOT's District 11 office

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in New Philadelphia said the transportation bill is expected to be finished sometime in March and would take effect in July.

The highway committee agreed to meet again in March to go over developments in highway funding that could impact the planning on completion of the highways.

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Paul Giannamore

**INVOLVED IN DISCUSSION** — About 40 members and interested parties of the Columbus to Pittsburgh Corridor Committee left the Longaberger Golf Course Friday promising to gauge local political support for asking the Ohio Turnpike Commission to study making the proposed freeway network a toll road to pay for its construction.

## Toll

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the state can ask the commission to study the feasibility of putting a toll on a road and having the commission operate and maintain it. He said the procedure hasn't been used beyond the Ohio Turnpike because Ohio hasn't needed alternative funding for new highways yet.

"The issue is, are you ready to do a toll road? I've reached the conclusion that there is no other money available. You can take all the time you want until you reach the same conclusion," Liggett said.

Steubenville Realtor Tony Guida, who is a Jefferson County representative on the committee, asked if pursuing interest in a possible toll road would be jumping ahead of the Ohio Department of Transportation, which will include a study of putting a toll on a 28-mile stretch of road from U.S. Route 22 near Cadiz to the U.S. Route 36 expressway at Dennison as part of determining how to pay for the project.

T.J. Justice, Coshocton County Port Authority director and co-chairman of the corridor group, said it won't hurt to explore multiple methods of paying for the highway's completion along its full length from Columbus to the Ohio River.

"We don't know what that study will say," he told Guida. "Under the circumstances, with no money available, we should move forward on as many different tracks as possible so that one of these tracks will lead to the intended result."

Ed Looman, executive director of the Progress Alliance economic development organization in Jef-

erson County, the area's other representative on the corridor committee, suggested the group move forward in talking to local political leaders about the toll road idea.

"We should all go back and talk about what we found out today and stress that if we really want it, we have to take the bull by the horns," he said.

Justice cautioned that in talking to local political leaders along the corridor that the group not raise expectations.

If the group finds support, it would suggest approaching the Ohio Turnpike Commission to study the entire group of existing highways along the corridor as a possible new turnpike.

The turnpike commission would be able to fund construction through tolls paying back bonds it would issue, as it has done in building and maintaining the Ohio Turnpike, I-80, since the 1950s.

Greg Gurney, director of planning for ODOT District 11, said a problem could be putting tolls on roads that already have been improved using federal money. All but the 28-mile section through Harrison County, a stretch east of Dresden in Coshocton County and a three-mile stretch east of Cadiz are already expressways or under construction to be expressways. Another project to complete the road network would be to improve an intersection near Newark.

Rick Platt, executive director of the Heath-Newark-Licking Port Authority; Jerry Nolder, executive director of the Zanesville-Muskingum Port Authority; and Justice sent a letter to Gov. Ted

Strickland asking for the corridor to be a high priority for federal stimulus funds. Strickland's response was to refer the matter to staff.

Brandon Kern, district representative for Sen. George Voinovich, R-Ohio, said the corridor committee shouldn't anticipate much help from the stimulus as it stands.

He said the House version of the economic package includes about \$30 billion for highways and bridges and the Senate version has about \$27 billion in it. Ohio could expect about \$1 billion to spread throughout the state, with much of the money going to plug a hole in the transportation budget.

The group confirmed Justice's offer of an at-large seat on the committee to Greg DiDonato, a former state legislator recently named director of the Ohio Mid-Eastern Governments Association.

The group's next meeting will be March 13 at a site to be named.

The Columbus to Pittsburgh Corridor Committee has been holding meetings for nearly two years to try to raise support for completing an expressway that would make a direct connection between Columbus and Pittsburgh, mostly along existing roads or upgraded existing roads. The lone section that does not exist is the 28-mile stretch from Dennison to the Cadiz area, which is under study as a result of a federal budget earmark.

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