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## Tolls for existing roads rejected

Columbus-Pittsburgh group continues to explore money options

By PAUL GIANNAMORE, Business editor

POSTED: March 14, 2009

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WEST LAFAYETTE - The idea of putting tolls on already completed expressway miles in the Columbus to Pittsburgh corridor was soundly rejected by the corridor committee during a meeting Friday morning at the Raven's Glenn Winery.

There wasn't much reason for an anti-tolling sentiment, however.

Representatives of the Columbus to Pittsburgh Corridor Committee, which includes representatives from a seven-county stretch from Columbus to the Ohio River, including Jefferson and Harrison counties, spent part of the past month assessing local government opinion on the possibility of getting a feasibility study to consider using tolls as a way to pay for completion of stretches of the road network.

The answers from representatives of each of the counties favored doing a feasibility study, but as the answers came from areas further west along the corridor, one thing became clear: Tolls on already completed expressways would be unwelcome.

Representatives of the Ohio Department of Transportation at the meeting had two basic answers that would preclude putting tolls on already finished expressways.

Bill Lindenbaum, District 5 director for ODOT, said the state "has no intention to toll anything that is existing. We have no intent of every trying to pursue putting tolls on existing facilities."

Further, Greg Gurney, director of planning for ODOT District 11, said it would literally take an act of Congress for tolls to be put on highways built with any share of federal money.

"The existence of any federal money spent makes it a public" property, which means tolls can't be levied, he said.

A study currently under way on a 28-mile section to connect from U.S. Route 36 at New Comerstown to U.S. Route 22 at Cadiz includes a study on the potential for tolls on the new stretch of road. T.J. Justice, co-chairman of the corridor committee and director of the Coshocton County Port Authority, said waiting a year for that study to be completed would delay any studies for stretches of highway still to be built in Coshocton County. After a lengthy discussion, the group decided Justice and co-chairman David Brenner, senior vice president of administration for White Oak Partners, will send a letter to ODOT Director Jolene M. Molitoris to put the corridor in line to be one of the pilot Transportation Innovation Authorities if the concept survives a Senate vote on the ODOT funding bill.

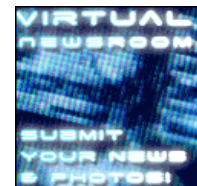
Under the concept, regions such as the seven-county highway corridor or parts of it could band together to form an authority to work with ODOT to use new financing tools to construct new or complete proposed highway projects.

There is a program to allow up to four such districts as test programs included in the House version of the ODOT bill, according to Bill Habig of Transportation Matters, a group forming to speak out on transportation issues and work on obtaining funding for all forms of transportation in Ohio.

The highway corridor committee agreed to pay \$250 for membership in Transportation Matters.

The committee approved Steubenville Realtor Anthony Guida's nomination of AEP Ohio President Joseph Hamrock, a Mingo Junction native, to be an at-large representative on the corridor committee.

The group received a preview of an economic report on existing businesses along the highway prepared by Angela Richcreek, community employment services manager, and Jessica Stoner, both from the Coshocton County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. The report data have been gathered by various groups in each county, including Progress Alliance in Jefferson County. It is still being compiled, and the report will be ready later in the year.



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Justice and Brenner were named to serve a second year as co-chairmen of the committee.

The next Columbus to Pittsburgh Corridor Committee meeting is set for April 24 in Steubenville.

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