

Strickland asked to intervene

Columbus-to-Pittsburgh Corridor gets cold shoulder from ODOT

By **PAUL GIANNAMORE**
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STEUBENVILLE — The Columbus-to-Pittsburgh Corridor Committee has sent a letter requesting Gov. Ted Strickland direct the Ohio Department of Transportation

to review its decision not to spend stimulus money or release spending for earmarks already made on any highway projects that are part of the corridor.

The group, formed in 2007, includes representatives of Jefferson, Harrison, Tus-

carawas, Coshocton, Muskingum and Licking counties seeking to complete a four-lane highway stretching from Columbus to Pittsburgh, providing a more direct link and alternative to often-congested Interstate 70. The group has been meeting regularly for

nearly two years and wants work to progress on five improvement projects along sections of state Routes 161 and 16 and U.S. Routes 250 and 22 between Columbus and the Ohio-West Virginia border at Steubenville.

The corridor committee's

next meeting will be at 10 a.m. Friday at Jefferson Community College.

"In recent months, all of the key projects left to be completed have stalled," read the letter, signed by corridor

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committee co-chairmen T.J. Justice, the executive director of the Coshocton Port Authority, and David A. Brenner, an investment adviser and former State Farm Insurance Co. official.

The letter notes that ODOT's previous reticence to proceed in engineering or other studies was removed by a change in state budget language last year, but ODOT "has resisted efforts to proceed with these studies, including the release of specific federal earmark funds."

"To be fair, ODOT's concerns center on the current deficit of funds and the availability of funds to begin future construction consistent with the prescribed timelines. Yet, it is our sense there is little attention being given to transportation improvements in the Columbus-Pittsburgh Corridor or the positive economic impact that would result from these improvements. The availability of stimulus package money can change all of that," the letter reads.

The letter notes the economic vitality the highway corridor represents, with manufacturing and tourism already established, as well as the potential for greater access to the New Horizons development area off Route 22 north of Wintersville as well as access to the proposed coal-to-liquid fuels plant at Wellsville, via access to state Route 7 at U.S. Route 22. The letter notes there are thousands of acres of "ready-to-go, rail-served industrial parks" from Heath

to Toronto that would be served by the highway.

A \$1.8 million earmark has been set aside by U.S. Rep. Pat Tiberi, R-Columbus, for a study of the limited-access interchange the corridor committee is backing for the Cherry Valley Road-state Route 16 intersection near Newark, but ODOT hasn't released the spending. A similar situation occurred with a \$500,000 earmark for the study of the 28-mile section that would connect from Route 22 at Cadiz with the U.S. Route 36 expressway at Dennison as part of the corridor. After local officials and the corridor committee intervened, the money was released and the study is under way. The corridor committee's letter contends the Cherry Valley interchange would have been ready to proceed with stimulus money if the earmark had been released and the study work completed.

"Please direct ODOT to promptly release the earmarks and diligently proceed with the studies and re-evaluate the distribution of stimulus money considering the circumstances and the consequential economic impact," the letter reads.

In recent months, the committee also has been pursuing the alternate track of seeking other funding for the projects, including the possibility of having the 28-mile section built by the Ohio Turnpike Commission.

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