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## Corridor Committee to meet with state official

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STEUBENVILLE - The leaders of the Columbus-to-Pittsburgh Corridor Committee will meet with the new director of the Ohio Department of Transportation in May to lobby for their efforts to see a four-lane highway built that would connect the state capital to Pittsburgh.

"Dave Brenner and I are scheduled to meet with ODOT Director Jolene Molitoris on May 28. We plan to discuss how in years past the district officials had more ability to give influence back to the main office. We also hope to come out of that meeting with better direction on how to go after federal transportation stimulus monies," T.J. Justice, co-chairman of the corridor committee and executive director of the Coshocton Port Authority, said during a Friday meeting at the Steubenville Country Club.

"Hopefully you will find out where ODOT stands on this project and determine if we need to work with ODOT or around them," suggested Steubenville Mayor Domenick Mucci.

Brenner and Justice sent a letter to Ohio Gov. Ted Strickland earlier this month requesting the governor direct the Ohio Department of Transportation 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.

"We put the governor on notice that we were disappointed by his decision to not award federal stimulus funds to this project," said Justice.

Justice suggested the committee proceed diplomatically at this point.

"The fact we were able to schedule this meeting is an improvement. We also plan to tell the new director that ODOT used to have corridor management groups in the 1990s. But at some point those positions went away. We will also ask Director Molitoris to assign a high level staff person with decision making power to attend our committee meetings to help us to help ODOT to move our projects to the next level," explained Justice.

But the apparent lack of progress on the project to complete a four-lane highway stretching from Columbus to Pittsburgh, providing a more direct link and alternative to often-congested Interstate 70 has left some committee members with visible frustration.

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.

"We have to cross the line and become more active. We have talked long enough. I want to see this project completed within next year or two. This affects all of us," said state Rep. John Domenick, D-Smithfield.

"We have to be diplomatic but stimulus money is flowing and if we can't get a response maybe it is time to organize a bus trip to Columbus to start lobbying elected and appointed officials," added Domenick.

"I have worked on this for the past 10 years. I know when we started we made a little noise but it never really took off until we joined all six counties together into this committee," said committee member Tony Gentile.

"Give Jolene a chance with this. You have a meeting scheduled so you can open the door. But after that we all have to keep the pressure on for this project," said Greg DiDonato, director of the Ohio Mid-Eastern Government Association.

DiDonato also said area residents should be updated on the project and the possibility the future highway may have to be funded in part by a toll road.

"But it will be an option at that point like the new toll road to the Pittsburgh International Airport. You could still use the old highway or take the toll road," said DiDonato.

The group was formed in 2007 and includes representatives of Jefferson, Harrison, Tuscarawus, Coshocton, Muskingum and Licking counties.

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