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Corridor group moving forward with plans

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POSTED: April 17, 2010

STEUBENVILLE - The Columbus-to-Pittsburgh Corridor Committee is moving ahead with plans to ask the state Legislature to give the corridor a formal name and designate money to erect signs along it.

The route includes several routes, mostly four-lane, from I-270 in Franklin County to the Veterans Memorial Bridge here. Motorists don't leave a single route, but drive along a highway with several different route designations.

The committee approved T.J. Justice, executive director of the Coshocton County Port Authority, and Ed Looman, executive director of Progress Alliance, sending a letter to state legislators along the corridor to seek their support.

The corridor committee, which meets quarterly, held its spring session Friday at Historic Fort Steuben downtown. Jerry Barilla, president of the board of trustees for the fort, told the group to stick with the highway concept, no matter the obstacles. He noted the fort grew out of an idea in 1979 when Geraldine Cohen and Mrs. Richard Q. King heard the late Jack Boyd, history professor and archaeologist from the Franciscan University of Steubenville, discuss the origins of the fort in 1787. They took the concept of a fort re-creation from there, he said. The fort's first blockhouse went up 10 years later and the surrounding park and amphitheater attract local residents and visitors from all 50 states and 50 countries.

"It is a testimony to vision," he said, comparing the long-term effort it took to what it will take to complete the highway corridor.

A 28-mile stretch of the road remains two lanes through Harrison County. A feasibility study on upgrading that stretch is headed toward a Sept. 10 completion, according to Greg Gurney, programs and planning administrator for the Ohio Department of Transportation District 11. He said a public input session should be held sometime in July.

Gurney cautioned that the feasibility study is not the same as an environmental and preliminary engineering plan. He said the final document will detail only very wide potential corridors in which to locate the highway, not exact alignment, and will include analysis of the potential of paying for the road with tolls.

Susan Wyant, planning administrator of the ODOT District 5 office, which oversees the western end of the corridor, said a project for upgrading state Routes 161 and 16 will be done by the end of June, with work progressing on the upgrade of the congested Cherry Valley intersection west of Newark.

An offshoot of the highway corridor committee, which has been formally meeting for about three years, is a tourism subcommittee. That committee has attracted interest among convention and visitors bureaus stretching from Reynoldsburg into Pittsburgh and Washington County, according to Tiffany Gerber, tourism and group tour manager of the Tuscarawas County Convention and Visitors Bureau. She said a meeting will be held Monday for all the tourism bureaus that can benefit from a four-lane Pittsburgh-to-Columbus connection, to meet with consultants from SuccessfulVentures. That company is headed by David Brenner, who is an original member of the Columbus-to-Pittsburgh committee. He said he'll be abstaining from any votes involving the tourism subcommittee in the future.

He said developing a brand for the corridor is necessary.

"Whether you are riding a motorcycle or driving a classic car or are out with the family, there is a lot to see and do here and it's not publicized as widely as it could be," he said.

Brenner stressed the tourism subcommittee and tourism directors hope that, while their organizations and members benefit from increased tourism, the highway committee will be able to show the state and federal government increasing traffic numbers that can bolster momentum for finishing the highway.

Tony Guida, a Steubenville Realtor who is one of Jefferson County's representatives on the highway corridor committee, presented a stack of resolutions passed by local governments, including those in Brooke and Hancock counties, too, developers and organizations in support of the highway.

Justice, co-chair of the corridor committee, along with Looman said they'll work to get resolutions approved by municipalities in other counties to present to the state.

Wintersville-area businessman Geno Morelli noted that he had first started using the routes the corridor committee is supporting back in the 1950s, when none of it was four-lane expressway. He said the work of the committee is a good idea.

"I thank you for what you all are doing," he said.

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