

Four-lane link not in plans

STUEBENVILLE HERALD STAR

7/31/10

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By PAUL GIANNAMORE
Business editor

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COSHOCTON — A bright spot in the effort to make a coherent four-lane highway corridor from Columbus to Pittsburgh as an alternative to I-70 and I-79 has been cooperation among tourism entities along the route.

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Tiffany Gerber of the Tuscarawas County Convention and Visitors

Bureau reported that \$750 has been collected each from Harrison, Licking, Tuscarawas and Delaware counties, Experience Columbus and the Top of West Virginia Convention and Visitors Bureau. Funding also is possible to be coming from Coshocton and Jefferson county entities, she said, and the group has contacted bureaus stretching from Western Pennsylvania (including Visit Pittsburgh) to the Columbus region (including Dublin, Reynoldsburg, Westerville and Worthington).

She said the tourism aspect of the

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be taken as the release of a feasibility study for the highway approaches toward year's end.

Tom Stratton of the Ohio Department of Transportation District 11 office at New Philadelphia said not to anticipate many changes in the draft of the study on the highway, being done by consultants Gannett Fleming on a \$410,000 contract.

Barbara Pincola, a Harrison County commissioner, and Wendy Zucal of the Dennison Depot Railroad Museum both said a draft from about a year ago did not support a four-lane expressway through Harrison County. Rather, concepts including a "super 2," a semi-limited access two-lane highway designed to standards like a full expressway, were included, along with options to upgrade roads that are already in existence.

The Columbus-to-Pittsburgh corridor uses portions of existing expressways and other routes to connect from U.S. Route 22, which connects as an expressway from Steubenville to Pittsburgh, to I-270 at New Albany. Routes that are part of the corridor include U.S. Routes 22, 250 and 36, as well as state Routes 16 and 161. Though all but a short section through Coshocton County and the 28 miles across Harrison County are expressway, there is no one route designation for the corridor.

A debate continues on how best to name the corridor, whether it be a single route number — which ODOT said would

be too expensive or add to confusion — or to have a legislative designation officially name the corridor.

Economic development data from the corridor committee was gathered beginning about 18 months ago, but the data has not been completed in an executive-style summary report to give to ODOT or the consultants. Ed Looman, executive director of Progress Alliance and co-chair of the corridor steering committee, said students from the Franciscan University of Steubenville are to complete the report when school resumes next month.

Susan Wyant, ODOT District 5 planning director, said the group needs to be sure the report includes a variety of information and focuses on the kinds of data ODOT needs to see if it were to seek funding in the future.

Sandie Mapel, Licking County Area Transportation Study director, said she has worked for ODOT and consultants in the past and would not expect major changes in the feasibility study just a few months before it is complete.

"You need to shake the trees now. Don't wait until just before the draft comes out," she said. Mapel suggested it's hard to change a study that has been in the works for two years once reports are compiled, drafts written and reviewed and the scope of the contract fulfilled.

"Do we know of a fatal flaw," she asked. "It's not done, but it is at the point where the consultant has done the

work and the funds have been expended and they have all the data and stakeholders have had input. I do not think you will see a final document that is more than text wrapped around the data you have already seen."

Mapel suggested members of the group need to review and comment as soon as possible on the segment of the report known as existing and future conditions.

Stratton said a stakeholders' meeting to review a draft of the report originally scheduled for July has been pushed to November, though the final report is expected to be done by the end of November.

Steubenville Realtor Anthony Guida, who has spearheaded local participation in getting the corridor recognized and final miles built, said he hopes the report from the university can help change the document.

"The biggest fear I have is that the tourism side seemed great. Getting truck traffic off I-70 seemed OK, but the economic development side does not fit their vision. They look at what exists, not at people who would expand or come. That's not included in the document and not in their study," he said.

Guida suggested it's time to be sure political candidates are aware of the corridor and suggested making sure gubernatorial and Senate candidates are asked their stance on the corridor.

On the naming and numbering front, letters sent to all state legislators along the seven-

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county corridor from Jefferson to Franklin County sought support for designating the segments of the highways involved as the Columbus-to-Pittsburgh Corridor. Only one legislator, Sen. Tim Schaffer, R-Lancaster, responded, and he said he was willing to discuss possible legislation. However, ODOT officials cautioned that legislation could have an adverse impact: Changing the name of portions of the highway already memorialized to others by previous legislation.

T.J. Justice, director of the Coshocton County Port Authority and co-chair of the steering committee, along with Mapel, said they would try to meet with and brief Schaffer about the legislation that is needed.

ODOT officials maintain it would cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to put up state-standard signs to change the name to one highway number, and adding a single new number over all the other route numbers would only serve to confuse drivers.

Rick Platt, director of the Heath-Newark-Licking County Port Authority, who began pushing for the corridor when he served as Progress Alliance executive several years ago, said a single route number is needed, especially to make it easy to give directions on how to follow the corridor.

(Giannamore can be contacted at pgiannamore@heraldstaronline.com.)

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corridor should be promoted even if a four-lane highway is never completed.

"In Tuscarawas County alone, there was \$275 million in direct and indirect spending from tourism in 2009," she said, noting recently released reports from the Ohio Division of Travel and Tourism.

Harrison County Commissioner Barbara Pincola said the state report shows an \$11 million impact from tourism on Harrison County.

"We can't take that lightly," she said. "Tourism is the group that adds weight to the whole (corridor) project."

A firm headed by Dave Brenner, a member of the steering committee who now abstains from all votes regarding tourism and the highway, is developing a brand and logo for the corridor tourism group.

Gerber noted the group has resulted in new ties among tourism leaders between Columbus and Pittsburgh.

"The Top of West Virginia was the second investor" in the effort to develop a Columbus-to-Pittsburgh brand, she noted. Top of West Virginia represents the Northern Panhandle.

Pincola said the tourism collaborative effort should continue even if the four-lane highways to complete the corridor are never built.

(Giannamore can be contacted at pgiannamore@heraldstaronline.com.)