

The Herald-Star

Established June 7, 1806

401 Herald Square, Steubenville, Ohio 43952

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AUG. 8, 2010

Our opinion

Highway fight just beginning

With ever-shrinking transportation budgets and a focus shifting away from new highway construction, there was little doubt that it would be an uphill battle to see a freeway built across Harrison County to complete a Columbus-to-Pittsburgh link.

But hope should not end like the U.S. Route 250 expressway does, just east of New Philadelphia, literally in a field.

Members of the Columbus-to-Pittsburgh Corridor steering committee were discouraged during a recent meeting by the belief that a consultant feasibility study on the completion of 28 miles of expressway to join U.S. Route 22 to an almost completed network of freeways will be negative.

We hope the discouragement is putting the cart before the horse, with the report's completion slated for later this year, but there are factors that suggest the consultant will recommend a thumbs down on the road as a four-lane expressway.

Part of the problem is economic development data from across a seven-county stretch from here to Columbus that has been included so far doesn't support the highway as a jobs and economic activity generator. But the report also is expected to include language about the millions of dollars in economic activity along and near the highway corridor as it already exists that result from tourism.

Is tourism not an industry that provides jobs and economic impact? Indeed it is. State figures show tens of millions of dollars in Harrison County alone come from tourism. We can envision that connecting Steubenville and Fort Steuben and the Ohio River to a highway alternative to the congested Interstate 70 would add to the potential of that industry, let

alone the chance to see more factories, stores and residential developments.

There are studies of freight and Ohio River traffic that are underway to determine how to develop port transfer areas and rail-to-road transfer areas, all of which will increase with greater river traffic anticipated when the Panama Canal expansion is completed in the next four years. Those numbers, however, won't be included in the feasibility study. The freight studies will be completed after the anticipated completion date of the highway feasibility study.

The area had to fight to get a congressional earmark spent on the feasibility study, and the answers the study may be ready to give seem as political as that original fight was three years ago.

We urge area residents and businesses to keep their eye on the results of the study and be prepared to inundate state and federal leadership with support.

Politics, after all, are what keeps highways alive. Politics sent I-70 to the Wheeling area in the 1950s instead of to the Steubenville-Weirton area. Politics and political pressure through the 1970s and 1980s led to the completion of the U.S. Route 22 freeway around Weirton and Steubenville in the 1990s, when the freeway used to end in surface streets in both communities.

The steering committee needs to recognize that a thumbs down on a report is only the beginning of the next round of the fight for a logical highway link that would complete expressways linking directly Columbus and Pittsburgh, instead of Columbus and Coshocton or Columbus and New Philadelphia.

Politics, when it comes to highways, actually can make for better logic than statistics.