

Corridor section report nears

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By PAUL GIANNAMORE
Business editor

DEERSVILLE — A report on building a 28-mile stretch of highway from Newcomerstown to an area west of Cadiz will be unveiled formally at the end of November.

Greg Gurney, Ohio Depart-

ment of Transportation District 11 planning and programs administrator, told a meeting of the Columbus to Pittsburgh Corridor Committee Friday morning at the Tappan Lake Marina that the proposed final version of the report will be available on an ODOT website as early as

next week.

Gurney said a meeting tentatively is set for 10 a.m. Nov. 30 at the ODOT District 11 offices, 2201 Reiser Ave., New Philadelphia, for stakeholders on the highway to discuss the contents of the report, which then will be formally presented to the public.

The highway is one of four major projects that would complete a roughly 160-mile corridor from I-270 at New Albany, northeast of Columbus, to the Ohio River at Steubenville. Proponents say the corridor is an alternative to congested I-70 in getting

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between the two metropolitan areas. Completion of the new road would open up much of Eastern Ohio to greater access, and thus economic development. Although there are several different route numbers on sections already built, essentially there is a four-lane expressway connecting through much of the seven counties, except for the 28 miles from the end of the four-lane at Newcomerstown and U.S. Route 22 at Cadiz. Gurney also noted there is a 2-mile section in Harrison County along U.S. Route 22 that never was built into a four-lane east of Cadiz.

Gurney explained the study for Mike Jacoby, Muskingum County Port Authority director, who replaced former Coshocton County Port Authority Director T.J. Justice as co-chair of the committee. The other co-chair is Ed Looman, executive director of the Progress Alliance eco-

nomic development agency in Jefferson County.

Gurney said the study will include results of looking at cultural and ecological resources along the potential highway, but not go so far as setting possible alignments for pavement or right of way.

The report will include the result of a look at building the highway as a tollway, as well as traffic projections looking 20 years into the future. Included in making a state recommendation on the road will be a study of congestion and accident data for U.S. Routes 36, 22 and 250, which the new road would supplement.

"The meat and potatoes of the report will be the planning study, which will indicate whether or not the road would sustain itself as a toll facility. That will have a big bearing on where we go next," he said.

The highway faces an uphill battle given the state's budget crisis, with at least a deficit of more than \$8 billion coming in the next biennial budget, noted Sandie Mapel of the Licking County Area Transportation Study.

Steubenville Realtor Anthony Guida, who has led the local involvement pushing for the highway for several years, said the potential of a new highway would open up Tappan Lake and its surrounding area for greater tourism.

He said the construction of U.S. Route 22 between Steubenville/Weirton and Pittsburgh has helped Western Pennsylvania with growth and development along the highway. Guida cautioned that if the study focuses only on conditions as they are, the highway might not make sense.

"It makes sense when you look at other areas and see what has happened," he said. Guida

pushed Gurney to be sure that, like a Realtor seeking to sell a house, the study has "comps" included — reports about comparable areas and the impact on growth and development a highway brings.

Gurney responded he also could see areas where highways failed to bring growth and development.

"Economic development is important, but I'm not sure how you would quantify it" for such a study, Gurney said.

He said if the report is favorable to the highway, the next step would be to find money to continue its planning, including environmental work and design. Guida said if the study is not supportive, pressure on elected representatives will be need-

ed to keep the project alive.

Ken Engstrom, district director for U.S. Rep. Zack Space, D-Dover, said the corridor committee needs to be sure the proximity of the corridor to the planned 49-megawatt solar power plant near the Wilds conservation area, just off I-70 in Muskingum County, is considered.

The power plant, when completed about 2014, will be the largest solar array in North America and one of the largest in the world. Two large Spanish firms are looking to Ohio to build plants that would support construction and operation of the massive power field, a project of a joint venture involving AEP Ohio.

"At least one of those companies is looking

along this corridor" for a plant site, Engstrom said. The solar plant is expected to create as many as 600 jobs, split between construction and permanent employment. Engstrom said the region should expect more development to spin off from having the factories and the power plant here.

"I think this has huge, huge potential from an economic development standpoint," he said. Space had worked to land the power plant in his area because of its potential. He noted the jobs cannot be outsourced.

The committee will meet again Nov. 19 in Coshocton County at a site to be determined.

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