

Replacing U.S. Route 250 rail bridge would eliminate 'energy choke point'

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The Ohio Department of Transportation, in cooperation with the Ohio Mid-Eastern Governments Association (OMEGA) and Harrison County, are applying for a Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) grant through the U.S. Department of Transportation to replace the bridge that carries the Panhandle rail line over Route 250 near the intersection of state Route 151, about five miles east of Dennison.

The project is expected to cost a little more than \$12.5 million.

Lisa Duvall, OMEGA’S communications manager, said the bridge is 3 feet too low for current standards.

“What we’ve seen with the oil and gas industry is that very large pieces of equipment simply won’t fit under the bridge,” she said. “There is no opportunity to widen it.”

As a result, trucks hauling oversized loads must take a 70-mile detour, using U.S. Route 22 from Cambridge to Cadiz. Many of these trucks are associated with multi-billion investments in the oil and gas industry in Harrison County.

“As the oil and gas industry matures, and now with the announcement of a natural-gas powered electric generating plant in Cadiz, a whole lot of trucks hauling equipment for the infrastructure will be coming in, and they can’t make it under that bridge,” said Kevin Beuttner, transportation planner/development specialist for OMEGA.

In addition, the rail bridge poses a safety hazard to motorists.

“Aside from making travel more efficient is the safety aspect,” Duvall said. “The bridge’s proximity to state Route 151 creates poor sight lines. Driving through there, you just can’t see around the bridge. Safety is a real priority.”

Beuttner said ODOT is working with the Genesee & Wyoming Railroad, which leases the Panhandle line from the state, on the project. Not only would the bridge have to be replaced, but work would have to be done to improve the grade on either side of the structure, which would have to be raised higher than it is now.

Nick Homrighausen, executive director for Community & Economic Development for Harrison County, said improving the bridge is an important step in a larger goal — creating a four-lane highway to connect Columbus and Pittsburgh.

Most of the route is already served by four lanes, except for the section from Newcomerstown to Cadiz and a few other small gaps.

Business owners prefer to be within 5 to 10 miles of a four-lane highway, he noted.

“In this global economy that eastern Ohio finds itself in with oil and gas, this road is important to Harrison County and eastern Ohio,” he said.

“We want to take care of any linchpin points, where it would slow a four-lane highway from being completed. This is just one of the projects we are working on. When the time comes and the money becomes available, having this done would save on project costs and be a no-brainer.

“Less than 30 percent of the Columbus-to-Pittsburgh corridor needs to be finished. We’re asking for this project to be completed. It would make it safer and easier for the transportation of goods and services.”

Harrison County is also working on cleaning up an abandoned gas station just east of Tappan Lake on Route 250. “We’re applying for a grant from the state for abandoned gas station cleanup,” Honrighausen said. “That would eliminate another potential choke-hold point.”

Beuttner said the federal government will announce later this year if the rail bridge project will receive funding.

“If it is awarded, the design phase would begin in January,” he said. “Construction would begin in the summer of 2021 or October 2021. It would be completed in two years.”

He noted that all of those dates are tentative.

“Those numbers could be flexible,” he said. “For a project of this magnitude, to have it

completed within a few years is fairly quick.”

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