

Official: 'Marion has great infrastructure'

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Marion Intermodal terminal manager Kelly Bonnette in 2012. Currently, Marion Intermodal has four trains arriving and departing daily, and the trains are growing longer, from 5,000 feet to 8,000 feet, Gus Comstock said (Photo: File photo)

MARION – Not only Marion County, but the Ohio Department of Transportation knows getting an overpass built on Ohio 309 just east of the city would have a variety of positive impacts on the community.

ODOT's District 6 office applied for an \$8 million U.S. Department of Transportation Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery Discretionary Grant, in its application stating that construction of the \$11 million overpass would "eliminate the blocked CSX railroad spur, improve traffic safety as well as promote economic development opportunities."

Whether a company will pick Marion County as the site of its new plant or as a place to maintain operations depends in large part on its access to major highways and railroads, sufficient water supplies and utilities, Gus Comstock said. Local officials will learn in the fall if the TIGER grant application for the overpass is awarded.

"Education, quality of life and infrastructure are the top three" assets an employer seeks, said Comstock, director of Marion CAN DO!, which contracts to do economic development for the city and county. "Marion has great infrastructure." The challenge for members of the Marion community is to make sure everyone knows that, he said.

"We have a meeting next week to make sure we have everybody on the economic development bus, that everybody has a seat," he said, referring to officials for the city and county and administrators for other community agencies.

Jobs ride on overpass

The overpass project, for which city, county and other local partners have said they will cover the remaining \$3 million cost, would expedite rail traffic to Marion Intermodal at Marion Industrial Center, which is located on Ohio 309, east of Pole Lane Road.

ODOT's application estimates the development will lead to the creation of 3,000-4,000 jobs in the area south of Marion Industrial Center and north of Patten Pike. Currently, there are 1,000 people per square mile employed at the center. A 10-year projection by Ted Graham, president of Marion Industrial Center, estimates employment at the center growing to 9,000 people if the center develops to 9 million square feet.

Currently, Marion Intermodal has four trains arriving and departing daily, and the trains are growing longer, from 5,000 feet to 8,000 feet, Comstock said. The intermodal provides companies rail access to and from the East Coast and Mexico.

The overpass project addresses two aspects of infrastructure, road and rail, as companies using the intermodal save money on shipping product via rail to the facility where it is transferred to tractor-trailers and hauled to their destinations. Graham said the overpass "should relieve the congestion as far as the rail in and out for the depot. It certainly would eliminate the congestion as far as the traffic on 309."

Rail rules

"Nobody in central Ohio has rail like Marion does," Comstock said. "It's just a unique characteristic of Marion County." That rail access is important to economic development "because of foreign trade. A lot of it goes by rail," he said.

"Then you've got (U.S.) 23 and the road network," he said. "The Northwest Connector was part of the Whirlpool (Corp.) expansion, which makes it kind of easier to get to 23. Then we've applied for the \$8 million TIGER grant to put (an overpass) over 309."

Comstock said education is a vital part of a community's infrastructure, referring to the Robotics and Advanced Manufacturing Technology Education Collaborative housed at Tri-Rivers Career Center, as well as Marion Technical College and The Ohio State University at Marion.

Human infrastructure

"I think the biggest opportunity we have in front of us right now is to find the 200 jobs Union Tank needs for the welders, because once that happens, the site selector universe is pretty small. Once word gets out ... they found 200 welders; that's not an easy task. Chuck Speelman and Ron Meade, they're on it," he said, referring to the Tri-Rivers superintendent and Ohio Means Jobs-Marion County administrator, respectively.

Union Tank Car announced in June that it will add a second facility, at 1207 Cheney Ave. in Marion, creating an additional 200 jobs over the next three years. "We can have the best sites in the world here, but if you don't have the workforce, they're worthless," Comstock said. "That's why it's so important that Ohio Means Jobs, Marion city, Marion County, ... everybody's on this economic development bus we're working on."

Sights on sites

Marion CAN DO!'s website currently shows 11 industrial buildings and seven greenfield sites available for companies looking to expand or locate.

"We have all of our sites updated to include the information that we expect will be required for them to be certified sites, plus additional information," he said, referring to the Ohio Job Ready Sites Program.

The Ohio Job Ready Sites Program was created to strengthen the portfolio of commercial and industrial developable sites in the state. Properties in the program were strategically chosen for their ability to provide optimal infrastructure capabilities and encourage economy-shifting investment. Funds from the program were targeted to offset costs typically incurred in speculative commercial and industrial development to accelerate investment decisions and to make the most of the development potential of each property.

Projects that receive funding from the Job Ready Sites Program must meet strict industry standards to receive certification, according to the Ohio Development Services Agency. The standards were developed by the ODSA and third-party engineering and site selection firms that have numerous years of experience in commercial and industrial development. The certification assures future investors that the property meets site selection standards and includes the needed attributes demanded by leading corporations, ODSA's website states.

"We've got our sites ready," Comstock said, adding that Columbus 2020, a regional economic development organization of which Marion County is a member, set a goal that each of its member counties have at least one certified site. "We've got five or six."

To market, to market

He said word is out that Amazon has discussed locating a couple of distribution centers in Ohio, "so we're getting real aggressive on social media so we're in people's faces ... that Marion would be a good location for a distribution center."

"Marion has fiber like nobody else, too," he said. "You've got META (Solutions), the former TRECA, that services all of Columbus and surrounding school districts. You have Frontier (Communications) here." He said water, sewer, electric and gas utilities are sufficient to handle expansion.

"Everything's here," he said. "The biggest challenge we have in Marion right now is we're here and open for business. That's why the social media thing is so important. We're on Twitter, Facebook, attending functions in Columbus."

"To me Marion is the new frontier," said the former Delaware County economic development director. "That's why we're making sure our sites, our profile; we're making sure CAN DO! is organized. We're very quickly trying to get this machine together."

"We can compete with the best here," he said. "We have sites that are just as competitive, the resources they need. We're just a little farther out in central Ohio, that first-ring area. There has to be a 'wow' factor when people look at stuff in Marion."