

The Marion Star

Marion area looks to rail for economic development

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Workers at Marion Intermodal transfer a freight container from a truck trailer to a rail car Aug. 10, 2010.(Photo: Marion Star file photo)

MARION – The Marion area’s future economic success may be riding the rails.

“Marion is known for the rail,” said Gus Comstock, Marion CAN DO! director and former Delaware County economic development director. “Delaware is always peeking over the fence at Marion. There’s nothing in Delaware like here. That’s what’s exciting about the future of development in central Ohio and around the nation. Rail is critical infrastructure that you need to compete, because that’s the cheapest way to get freight to one place from another.”

While roads, utilities, water and sewer all compose the infrastructure of a community, it’s ready access to rail that helps the Marion area to stand out, Comstock said.

“Roads are important, but every community’s got roads going in and out of it,” he said. “But not a lot of communities can say they have rail like Marion does.”

Currently, the rail holding the most attention in Marion County is the track running across Ohio 309 into and out of Marion Intermodal, a facility developed by Ted Graham, president of Marion Industrial Center, working with Schneider National and CSX Transportation.

An investment of more than \$3.5 million, the facility located behind Marion Industrial Center on Harding Highway East enables companies to ship freight from the East Coast to the West Coast, parts in between, and Mexico. Intermodal containers are shipped in by train and unloaded onto semis, which haul the loads to their destinations.

Help sought from state

Citing the daily blocking of Ohio 309 by trains sitting while containers are loaded and/or unloaded, Graham has sought assistance from the Ohio Department of Transportation in resolving the problem.

ODOT held a public meeting last July to receive public input regarding its plan to relocate Ohio 309 from Harding Highway East to approximately the route currently covered by Patten Pike along properties abutting the rear of Marion Industrial Center. Some neighbors of the facility expressed opposition to the plan presented by ODOT as its top choice, citing concerns about the resulting impact on an auto service business and public safety.

ODOT has not scheduled a second public meeting as officials wait to learn the amount of state funding that may be available for the rerouting.

Other routes and proposals that would include an overpass also were discussed at the first public meeting.

Comstock said the intermodal/Ohio 309 issue is important to the Marion community's economic future.

"It maybe needs to be enhanced," he said, referring to Marion Intermodal. "I know one of the big concerns here are the trains blocking 309. ... It's a critical economic development obstacle, resolving that issue with 309."

Potential job creation

Graham has said resolution of the Ohio 309 crossing concern would lead to the potential creation of up to 9,000 additional jobs at his facility.

Comstock said Marion Intermodal "makes Marion unique in the region. ... It's something as a community we have to start trumpeting. People need to start being aware. ... We've got to start showing up at Columbus events and have our name tags on and say, 'We're from Marion.' We need to be on the central Ohio radar."

Business at the intermodal has increased "like 20 percent year over year," Graham said. "I don't know where the increased business is coming from. I just know that it's happening. It could be business is better for everyone. It could be the word is out that Marion is the place to go."

The expansion of the Panama Canal, scheduled for completion in 2016, will “cause the price to be even more competitive, and when it’s more competitive, that translates to better pricing for the consumer,” he said. “And that’s all good.”

He said freight that is time-sensitive likely will continue to be delivered to ports in Los Angeles and Seattle because the freight will get to New York 10 days faster than it would going through the Panama Canal. He said for products that aren’t time-sensitive “it might make sense to bring it through the Panama Canal.”

“Here’s what I know: Competition will answer that question. If the West Coast guys are demanding more money and it makes it too expensive, that’ll help the canal. If the canal gets greedy, that’ll be bad for the canal and good for the West Coast. All of these items will come into play. It’ll be very interesting what happens over the next two to five years.”

He said eventually the canal expansion could lead to someone developing a distribution center in the Marion area because it’s within 600 miles of 60 percent of the U.S. and Canadian market.

“That in itself is going to create logistics-type jobs, which Columbus already has,” he said.

Airport an asset

Comstock said Marion Municipal Airport is “just as important an entry as when you’re driving in on (U.S.) 23. The airport is a major entry point into this community, and it needs to be dressed up to show that.”

“There needs to be something at the airport that says ‘Welcome to Ohio,’” he said. “When corporate jets are coming in here, we need to be sensitive to that.”

He said the community should use the airport to its full advantage.

“Where do the pilots go?” he said. “When they drop somebody off, what are they doing? Who’s flying in? Where are they going? Do we need a rental car? There’s a whole bunch of stuff we need to be aware of.”

He suggested having a car driven out to the airport apron to pick up corporate executives and/or the use of a red carpet.

“Perception is 80 percent of reality,” he said. “They may be making a decision about whether they want to move their company to Marion.”

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