

Making the Roadway Connections

By Symone C. Skrzycki

Port to River Ridge

It's been a long time coming.

For more than 40 years, the goal has been to enhance travel between Indiana and Kentucky in the Jeffersonville-Louisville area. The Ohio River Bridges Project, which involves construction of two bridges – East End Crossing and Downtown Crossing – will provide greater access and a variety of economic opportunities.

A related initiative that's crucially important, but hasn't received as much attention, is a new transportation corridor (including road and rail) that will connect two of the region's economic engines: the Port of Indiana-Jeffersonville and River Ridge Commerce Center.

Located a mile apart, both offer strategic advantages, but there is no direct transportation connection between them. The Port spans approximately 1,000 acres and is home to 28 companies – the majority of which are involved in steel processing. It offers outstanding road, rail and water capabilities, but lacks land mass (individual industrial sites cap out at 140 acres).

By contrast, River Ridge, a former Indiana army ammunition plant, stretches 6,000 acres. Only 400 acres have been redeveloped.

The transportation corridor will connect the two. Approval to proceed with the road has been achieved; funding efforts remain underway for the rail component.

"I honestly can think of no other area in the Midwest or in the region that offers the economic potential in attracting investment and building business than does this economic zone," declares Scott Stewart, director of the Port of Indiana-Jeffersonville.

Currently, those trying to reach the Port from the south and east must drive 20 miles out of their way through downtown Louisville and Jeffersonville to travel a half-mile across the Ohio River. The East End Crossing, which will stand less than a mile from the Port, will complete a loop around the Louisville metro area and dramatically trim their commute.

The goal is to finalize funding and open the transportation corridor – including road and rail – to coincide with the East End bridge's debut in 2016. The Downtown Crossing doesn't directly tie into the Port/River Ridge connection, but is expected to open at the same time.

"The bridges project tops off the multi-modal advantages of this port," Stewart notes.

"The combined assets here, enabled by the transportation corridor link (road and rail), is what changes the game. The ability to reach the water, the ability to have common rail service and the ability to connect – particularly those steel processors at the port, but also future manufacturers at River Ridge – creates a significant competitive advantage for Indiana."



Steel coils processed at the Port of Indiana-Jeffersonville are loaded onto a truck for transport. A proposed road/rail corridor between the Port and nearby River Ridge Commerce Center would provide additional transportation and economic opportunities.

RESOURCE: Scott Stewart, Port of Indiana-Jeffersonville, at www.portsofindiana.com | River Ridge Commerce Center at www.riverridgecc.com

Dubois County to I-69

A Southwest Indiana coalition striving to build an interstate connecting the region to more economic opportunities is making progress, but there is still a long road ahead.

Dubois County boasts one of the state's lowest unemployment rates (4.9% in February) and leading manufacturing companies in Jasper and Huntingburg. Hank Menke, who is heading the Midstate Corridor project, says that constructing a new roadway that would connect to Interstate 69 could leverage those strengths.

"I-69 has plugged Evansville into Indianapolis, which is wonderful. But in some cases, it kind of isolated Dubois and Spencer counties because it went pretty far west. I'm trying to get a road connection and utilize I-69," he explains.

Menke serves on the Blue Ribbon Panel on Transportation Infrastructure, a statewide group appointed by Gov. Pence that focuses on critical transportation issues.

"I understand it's a big dream, but the Governor wants us to think out of the box."

A fully-developed Midstate Corridor ultimately could go from Nashville, Tenn. to Grand Rapids, Mich. It would utilize portions of I-69, while providing links that currently don't exist and connecting many smaller communities to the interstates. The more immediate goal, however, is to connect Interstate 64 to I-69.

"I look at 69 and 65 as main arteries, and I look at what we need now are capillaries," asserts Menke, who is CEO of furniture company OFS Brands in Huntingburg. "We need to get plugged into those main arteries."

"We have a trucking company that supports our business. We refuse to send them up (north on) 231 (instead, they travel to Indianapolis via Interstate 65 or 69). "It's dangerous," he emphasizes. "The savings for us to go north to Indianapolis (using the new roadway) would be a quarter of a million a year."

Alan Johnson, dean of Vincennes University's Jasper campus and chair of the Dubois Strong economic development group, echoes that sentiment.

"The people who are shipping product see this (Midstate Corridor) as critical to keeping these communities growing and thriving," he asserts.

Menke concludes, "Indiana is in an unbelievable position for growth. I think the state could be a powerhouse in terms of logistics, and what we lack is roads. I want to get this dynamo Dubois County plugged in."

RESOURCES: Hank Menke, OFS Brands, at www.ofsbrands.com | Alan Johnson, Vincennes University Jasper campus, at www.vinu.edu/jasper