

Quick finish on bypass praised

By David Patch

NORTH BALTIMORE, Ohio -- The speed with which the Ohio Department of Transportation designed and built a State Rt. 18 bypass around this southern Wood County village was a recurring theme during the road's dedication Monday afternoon.

"To go from six or seven years down to two years, that's just fantastic," Gov. John Kasich said during a news conference next to a roundabout -- the first on a state highway in northwest Ohio -- at the new Route 18 junction with North Baltimore's Main Street.

Clarence Gooden, an executive vice president at CSX Transportation, apologized to the governor for having laughed early last year when state officials pledged to get the 2.2-mile, \$5.8 million road built by the end of 2012.

"I was just flat out wrong," said Mr. Gooden, whose company's 500-acre intermodal terminal that opened last year west of town in Henry Township was the main reason for building the bypass.

Six to seven years had been the standard ODOT timeframe for designing projects, obtaining environmental permits, buying land, and construction, but department Director Jerry Wray said the faster track is what people should expect in the future.

"The changes we made in the project development process for this project, we are now incorporating in all our projects," Mr. Wray said. "This is not your grampa's ODOT. We're going to be moving a lot faster."

Route 18's old path through North Baltimore, to be posted as Business 18, followed Main Street to the center of town and then went west on West State Street. Through traffic had to turn twice -- once to the right, once to the left -- and state and local officials feared increasing safety and congestion problems with increasing numbers of large trucks passing through on their way to or from the CSX terminal.

ODOT chose the road's new alignment, a broad S curve running from Main at its east end to Liberty Hi Road near the rail yard, from among four options it publicly announced in 2011. Contractor R.D. Jones began work early this year.

Route 18's new path "will further position us to experience additional development, while maintaining the quiet village atmosphere" that North Baltimore residents are accustomed to, village Mayor Mike Julien said.

The roundabout at Main Street's south end will become "an attractive front door for our community," the mayor said, noting that a local Boy Scout has announced plans to dress up the new intersection as a community-service project for his Eagle rank.

Rex Huffman, director of Wood County Economic Development, called the road "a monument to leadership," while CSX's Mr. Gooden said the combination of public and private investment -- now approaching a quarter-billion dollars -- "is putting this place on the map nationally.

"There isn't a week where we aren't touting the benefits of northwest Ohio," the railroad official said, noting that CSX bridge and tunnel projects that will allow trains to carry stacked freight containers between North Baltimore and Boston, eastern Pennsylvania, and the Carolinas are proceeding apace.

The new road "will eliminate bottlenecks and lead to more jobs. North Baltimore is going to be a place where people say, 'How did they do that up there?' " Governor Kasich said, predicting that the area will become "the new Chicago, I hope" for transportation and logistics.

Article continued here: <http://www.toledoblade.com/local/2012/11/20/Quick-finish-on-bypass-praised.html>