

# West still the best direction for four-lane road across state

BY CHARLES CLEMENTS

"Alternate Route to Ohio and points West"

A sign bearing those words will greet you if you are traveling along Interstate 70 in Maryland toward West Virginia. The sign sits near Hancock, Md., where I-70 offers a split onto Interstate 68, an east-to-west thoroughfare that connects Hancock to I-79 in Morgantown.

But the message — alternate route to Ohio and points west, referring to the I-68 split — could be described as misleading.

Nearly 25 years ago, construction on I-68 was completed. The 112-mile interstate is a scenic, safe and, most people would say, necessary highway to Morgantown. And then it ends. It does not make its way to Ohio or any point farther west. Nor do any other four-lane roads.

In fact, the only way you can travel within the Mountain State from north central West Virginia to the Ohio Valley is by a winding two-lane road. And a prayer.

The purpose of I-68, when construction began in 1965, was to improve economic conditions in Allegany, Garrett and Washington counties in Maryland and Preston and Monongalia counties in West Virginia. That same push for economic growth should be continued to western Monongalia, Marion and Wetzel counties.

We must extend I-68 from either Morgantown or Fairmont to the Ohio Valley.

There is an abundance of opportunity for natural gas development and manufacturing that has opened up our area of the state. Power plants are being planned and industry is increasing. There is so much potential bottled up in this region, yet we lack any form of reliable transportation to help tap into this potential.

Why exactly is a four-lane road so important? Many would argue that we have managed just fine up to this point. This area, however, has lost many developmental op-

portunities because of this lack in infrastructure.

In 2012, Shell agreed to purchase property in Pennsylvania for a future ethane cracker and petrochemical complex. The complex is located on Pa. Route 18 and is in close proximity to Interstate 376 — both major Pennsylvania highways.

Earlier this year, Procter & Gamble announced that it would be building a manufacturing plant in Berkeley County. This \$500 million facility will be located along Interstate 81 giving P&G access to 80 percent of its customers in a one-day trek.

Several weeks ago, Ohio announced that Appalachia Resins will build a \$1 billion cracker plant in its state instead of at a site in West Virginia the company had been considering. The new site location? Along Ohio Route 7 — a highway that is four-laned in its northern tier.

In fact, all of these new projects are being planned near a four-lane road. Near major transporta-

tion. Such infrastructure is one of the direct reasons for these major developments.

By continuing I-68 to a four-lane version of W.Va. 2, we could create a plethora of opportunity for the people of the Ohio Valley and north central West Virginia. We would have a bargaining chip to convince companies to locate within our state. With their investments, downstream industries would form and jobs would be created. An often forgotten region of West Virginia could become thriving and competitive.

If I-68 were built through the aforementioned West Virginia counties and to Ohio, this region would easily be able to access the port of Baltimore. We would be within an easy one-day drive of the port, which would create opportunities for companies to increase their reach exponentially.

P&G is locating in Berkeley County because from there the company has access to 80 percent

of its customers in the eastern United States — again, in a one-day transit. If P&G could have located a few hours farther west, it could have also reached its Eastern customer base, as well as expanded its reach to even more cities. An extension of I-68 could make this happen. Maybe not for P&G, but possibly for another company of that magnitude.

The 1989 movie "Field of Dreams" made famous the phrase: "If you build it, he will come." This is a case where the saying is true.

Provide companies with a four-lane road to safely transport their goods, services and materials, east and west, to and from the Ohio Valley — and they will come.

We've seen it in Pennsylvania and Ohio. We've even seen it in West Virginia. But, first, we must build.

**CHARLES CLEMENTS** is a former state legislator and currently the executive director of the Route 2/I-68 Authority. This commentary should be considered another point of view and not necessarily the opinion or editorial policy of *The Dominion Post*.