

December 28, 2011
The Daily American

By: Michelle Ganassi

When U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire talks to people in Somerset County, he said everyone asks him about finishing Route 219 from Somerset to Meyersdale.

"The first thing everybody says is 219," he said. "It's the most important thing going on."

On Wednesday the Allegheny County Democrat held a meeting with Pennsylvania Department of Transportation officials to learn about the project. He met with District 9 executive Tom Prestash, senior project manager Jim Pruss, assistant district executive for design Vince Greenland and Somerset County Commissioner John Vatauk. They talked about the project's details, including route, construction, design and funding needs for construction of the 10 1/2-mile stretch of unfinished roadway.

Prestash said that all of the money for the more than \$300 million project has been secured except for the final \$35 million state match. The project will probably take about five years to complete, he said.

"Once we get the green light it will be about five to six months until we can open up bids," he said.

Altmire was interested in where the project ranks in the region, whether all of the rights of way have been secured and the area's reception to the project. Prestash said the Somerset community is open to the project and wants to see it completed.

"This area has shown us nothing but open arms," Prestash said.

Altmire, who serves on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, asked what would happen if the toll credit language is not changed to allow those funds to be used for projects such as Route 219. Toll credits have been suggested as the state match for the project.

Prestash said \$35 million would have to come from Harrisburg.

"It would be a very heavy load to lift," he said.

Prestash said there is enough money from toll credits to cover the \$35 million gap. Changing the language would ensure the project would move forward.

"We feel confident if that toll credit language is changed it is a no-brainer," he said.

Altmire serves on the transportation committee with Republican U.S. Rep. Bill Shuster, whom he described as a relentless advocate for the project. He said the measure has bipartisan support in the House. But after passing the House it has to pass the Senate and be signed into law by the governor.

"We'll get it in the House side," he said. "It's still an uphill fight."

Altmire noted that few projects are beneficial to an entire area.

"This is a great example of a true benefit to the region," he said.

