

Oak Ridge Corridor – a brand idea whose time has come!

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on October 26, 2015)

"It's time to name the four-lane highway from the Knoxville airport to Oak Ridge the '**Oak Ridge Corridor**.'" – Lamar Alexander, September 3, 2015, Oak Ridge, TN

A recent letter to the editor writer in *The Oak Ridger* said, "Who put the idea of an 'Oak Ridge Corridor' in the head of Lamar Alexander?" According to Darrell Akins, a fellow *Oak Ridger* and long-time friend of the former Governor - now Senator, Mr. Alexander came up with the idea himself in the early 1980's.

Darrell explains, "I was serving as the Deputy Commissioner of Transportation when the Governor decided building a four-lane highway from the airport in Blount County to Oak Ridge was a top priority. He knew immediately it could be more than a just a slab of concrete and that it would create a science and technology corridor to show linkage of Oak Ridge to the entire region."

"This would be happening just at the time a new contractor was taking over the Department of Energy operations with the promise of more aggressive technology transfer and economic development partnerships. He went further to say the entire region needed to leverage the global brand of Oak Ridge in promoting the advantages not only of Oak Ridge, but also the main campus of the University of Tennessee and the headquarters of the Tennessee Valley Authority. And the best way to do that was to call it the Oak Ridge Corridor.

"So, the Senator's recent comments just didn't pop into his head or come from a staffer. It's truly the 35-year vision of one of our state's most important leaders and statesmen, as well as one of Oak Ridge's most important advocates," concludes Akins.

Once in a great while an idea emerges that is just plain old common sense. When that happens it is time to grab on to it and run with it. In the weeks since Senator Alexander spoke the words quoted above and added, "Today, the time is right!" While I may not be aware of all that the Senator's comments have inspired, here is one thing I am aware of that is being done.

The Oak Ridge City Council has established a five member *Oak Ridge Corridor Initiative Committee* to study the "economical, regional, and marketable benefits" of creating the "**Oak Ridge Corridor**" by applying that name to the four-lane highway from McGee Tyson Airport to Oak Ridge. If you have an interest in serving on this committee, the City Clerk's Office is accepting resumes and letters of interests. Here is the link: <http://oakridgetn.gov/departmentpg/CityClerk/City-Council-Committees/Oak-Ridge-Corridor-Initiative>

However, even as I am encouraged by this action taken by our city council, I believe a caution is in order. Senator Alexander mentioned Blount County and Knox County as key elements in this initiative. We in Oak Ridge **MUST NOT** attempt to do this alone. We **MUST** include Knox, Blount, Roane and Anderson Counties! Even in the above mentioned, "Oak Ridge Corridor Initiative Committee," an expanded membership beyond only five members from Oak Ridge is required. Without including our neighboring counties, I fear we are doomed to frustrated failure!

Senator Alexander went on to describe the enormous potential of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory's brainpower with examples of the Manufacturing Demonstration Facility, 3-D printing, supercomputing (the world's leader by 2017) and remarked on the 6,000 scientists from around the world who use these resources. He cited the Uranium Processing Facility, one of the largest construction projects in the country. Amazing things that are happening here in Oak Ridge NOW!

All this translates into jobs for East Tennessee. The signature name of **Oak Ridge Corridor** will "let the world know exactly where to put those jobs" said Lamar Alexander.

I certainly appreciate the Senator's devotion to the term "**Oak Ridge Corridor**" as a brand and for his advocacy for its use as a regional brand. It is, indeed, the single most recognizable aspect of our city, the government sites located here and, I believe, should be the best choice for a regional brand for this area

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of East Tennessee. It is international in scope. It is the most widely recognized brand of anything else in East Tennessee, Tennessee or the maybe even the Southeast!

The Senator went on to say, “**Oak Ridge Corridor** is a signature and identity not unlike the Research Triangle in North Carolina or Silicon Valley in California. If you stop and think about it, there is probably no better-known brand name in the world that represents excellence in science, research, technology and supercomputing — the resources that are a magnet for advanced manufacturing companies with good-paying jobs.”

When regional planning takes place and when East Tennessee wide technological activities are discussed or written about, the term “**Oak Ridge Corridor**” would serve to brand those concepts and ideas. Only with a HIGH PROFILE project to implement the Senator’s **Oak Ridge Corridor** as a regional brand will the benefits be realized.

A strategic planning effort for the future of our city and the East Tennessee region as well as how to take advantage of **Oak Ridge Corridor** as the best brand in the nation and maybe even the world, might just be in order. Our Knoxville neighbors as well as our Maryville/Alcoa neighbors MUST be included! Also appropriate others who bring regional understanding and emphasis on economic development of the region should all form a regional team to support the **Oak Ridge Corridor** idea.

A SMALL BUT MAYBE HIGHLY SIGNIFICANT step was taken by the Oak Ridge Convention and Visitors Bureau when they and *The Girl on the Roof* marketing firm located in Knoxville created an outstanding “Explore Oak Ridge” web site: www.exploreoakridge.com We could use that medium to promote the idea of the brand, **Oak Ridge Corridor**.

While this may seem trivial, putting signs on the bridges over roads that are entrances to Oak Ridge with statements (even whimsical ones) that can be changed might help spark some innovation and creative thinking. The **Oak Ridge Corridor** brand can become a catalyst for pride in our regional accomplishments and serve to promote regional economic development.

What if we (Knox, Blount, Roane and Anderson Counties as well as the cities involved) agreed to just put up signs, “**OAK RIDGE CORRIDOR**,” on each end of Pellissippi Parkway and at the entrance to State Highway 162 from I-40/I-75 and at the South Illinois Avenue bridge on Pine Ridge?

No need to rename the roads, just put up the signs and start using the brand!

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Entrance to Oak Ridge could include an “Oak Ridge Corridor” sign



Bridge on Pine Ridge entrance to Oak Ridge would be a good place for a banner proclaiming the brand, “Oak Ridge Corridor!”