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Opinion

Chokehold on Atlanta
The killer General Assembly of '08 condemns metro area to congestion,
with no relief in sight
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Once again, the Georgia General Assembly has done nothing to address metro Atlanta's crippling traffic problem. Once again, state officials have deemed it wise to let metro commuters simmer in traffic, knowing nothing is being done to help them. The only remaining question is whether the region's voters will let their leaders get away with it.

Once again.

Metro Atlanta did have one hope for progress — a proposal to let the region and other areas around the state tax themselves to pay for regional transportation projects. Metro Atlanta wasn't asking the rest of Georgia to pay higher taxes; it was merely seeking the right to help itself, since state officials clearly have little interest in doing so.

But last week, even that proposal was allowed to die in the state Senate, the victim of opposition by Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle and Gov. Sonny Perdue. Perdue in particular has shown no interest whatsoever in helping the region solve its problems.

He does, on the other hand, offer excuses.

This week, the governor tried to wash his hands of the latest failure, claiming that his position has been vindicated by the "discovery" of additional financial questions at the state Department of Transportation.

"The more information that I frankly hear from [Transportation] Commissioner [Gena] Abraham, the more convinced I am right now that money may have exacerbated the problem right now," Perdue said. "I think frankly we've saved ourselves."

Frankly, the governor is blowing smoke.

The latest problems "uncovered" at the DOT aren't really new, and to some degree are the product of the governor's own policies. Nor can they be used in any way to justify killing the regional tax proposal.

Had it been approved by this year's General Assembly, the proposal would have been put to a vote statewide in November. If approved then, metro voters would have been asked to approve a regional tax, a vote that could have taken place no earlier than late 2009 or early 2010. The very earliest that regional projects could have started would have been 2011 — three years from now — with 2013 a more likely target.

If Perdue is claiming that the DOT will still be dysfunctional three to five years from now, then maybe Abraham— his handpicked person to lead DOT — isn't the right person to revamp the agency after all.

(It is also possible that a larger game is afoot. By denying metro Atlanta other alternatives, Perdue may be giving the region no choice but to accept an eventual toll-based solution.)

Cagle and members of the state Senate also deserve a good share of the blame for failure of the regional approach. The idea of a regional tax originated in the Senate and passed by a vote of 51-4 earlier in the session. But after the House enthusiastically approved a somewhat revised version of a regional tax, Cagle and Senate leaders suddenly became very cool to the idea.

In the end, the proposal fell short by three votes in the Senate. Five senators who opposed the measure or did not vote for it — Ronnie Chance, Vincent Fort, Chip Rogers, David Shafer and John Wiles — represent districts in the metro area.

By their action, they condemned constituents to years and years of worsening traffic, with little cause for hope.

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