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**Cobb puts some sales-tax funded road work in park**

**Under the radar: Due to rising construction costs, lowered expectations of federal money, some projects will be delayed.**

**Craig Schneider** – staff

Some Cobb County voters who approved a penny sales tax for road improvements are likely to be disappointed that their elected officials quietly shelved \$64 million worth of work, citing a lack of federal money and rising construction costs.

Cobb transportation chief David Montanye said about \$44 million in projects were delayed about two years because federal money failed to come through. Another \$19 million project, to ease traffic along Big Shanty Road, was delayed from next year to 2013 due to the rising costs of construction materials.

The delayed projects are among \$873 million in transportation improvements included in the penny sales tax approved by Cobb voters in 2005. In pitching the tax to voters, county officials included projects all over the county. The six-year tax passed by just 117 votes in a low-turnout special election.

The local tax has brought in about \$131 million, some \$7 million more than expected at this time, officials said. The federal money adds to the pot. Cobb had expected to receive about \$150 million in federal funds by now, but has obtained only \$84 million, leaving a \$66 million gap, officials said. Add in the rising construction costs, and Cobb officials have estimated that a total of about \$100 million worth of projects funded by the special purpose local option sales tax may be in danger.

Though no project has been officially dropped, the delays show Cobb officials making the first of what may be many decisions as they struggle with higher construction costs and less than expected federal aid.

Cobb officials say they hope to find ways to either restore the federal money or find new funds. But if that doesn't happen, they acknowledge tougher choices lie ahead. They also said that while a handful of projects have been delayed, the great majority of transportation measures financed through the sales tax continue at a strong pace, with more than 50 projects moving ahead of schedule, including improvements to Atlanta Road, Paces Ferry Road and Bill Murdock Road.

Still, some Cobb residents say they suspect the delays approved last week by the County Commission pave the way to remove projects from the plan. These residents are upset because they believe voters approved the SPLOST believing they would receive the whole package of about 300 projects.

"The SPLOST was sold on the idea that all this funding would come through," said Lance Lambertson, who led the unsuccessful effort to defeat the vote in 2005. "We were sold a bill of goods."

John Osborne, a west Cobb resident who ran unsuccessfully last year for commissioner, said if projects are dropped, "It is a broken promise."

Cobb County Commission Chairman Sam Olens said it is unfair to criticize the board on its actions regarding the SPLOST. He said the board in 2005 made the best estimates it could about the federal funding, but the financial picture has changed. He said it is cynical to believe voters thought nothing could change regarding state and federal funding.

"By definition, everyone knows there are always cost increases and changes to the projects," Olens said. "We said we that we would do the best of our efforts." Some residents agree with him, such as Chris Dusack of east Cobb. Dusack said he understood that federal money could change the overall plan and that only a few projects have been delayed.

Like many metro Atlanta counties, Cobb must deal with the \$7.7 billion shortfall in federal transportation dollars to the region. Federal funding has shrunk due to big-ticket national costs such as the Iraq war and hurricane relief efforts, said David Haynes, a senior planner with the Atlanta Regional Commission, which distributes federal transportation money among the region.

Traffic congestion ranks among the major complaints of Cobb County residents and workers, and the penny tax was intended as a major step in helping the road system catch up with the county's residential and commercial growth.

Ron Sifen, president of the Vinings Homeowners Association, said the County Commission should do a better job of informing voters that SPLOST projects could be delayed or eliminated, depending on outside money.

Sifen also said he would have preferred that the board hold a public hearing on these changes, instead of just approving them as part of the "consent agenda" with no public discussion.

The consent agenda combines numerous items into one commission vote.

Cobb officials, in response, said that any future SPLOST change will appear as its own item on the regular agenda, which would include an airing of the issue.

#### DELAYED ROAD PROJECTS

> The Powder Springs Connector, a new road linking Powder Springs Road to South Cobb Drive, near Marietta — \$15.4 million. The project did not receive anticipated federal funding.

- > Adding lanes to Cobb Parkway from Mount Paran Road to Paces Mill Road, in southeast Cobb — \$17.2 million. The project did not receive anticipated federal funding.
- > Adding lanes to Cobb Parkway from Paces Mill Road to Akers Mill Road, in southeast Cobb — \$12 million. The project did not receive anticipated federal funding.
- > Phase 3 of Big Shanty Road improvements, from Busbee Parkway to Chastain Meadows Parkway, in north Cobb — \$19 million. The project was delayed due to rising construction costs.

Staff

#### ROAD PROJECT DELAY

The Powder Springs Connector is among several SPLOST-funded road projects delayed by Cobb County officials.

Map locates proposed connector. Inset map outlines area of detail in Cobb County.