

April 08, 2008
Gwinnette Daily Post

HOT lane proposal could again be considered for federal money
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LAWRENCEVILLE - - More money may be available to create optional toll lanes on a portion of Interstate 85.

The proposal, which fell short of winning a grant from the federal Department of Transportation last summer, would put high-occupancy toll lanes on a 14.4-mile stretch from Interstate 285 to Old Peachtree Road. A second phase of the project could extend the lanes up Interstate 985.

Monday, the Department of Transportation announced that New York City would not be using the \$354.5 million it was awarded to implement congestion pricing in the city. That money could instead be distributed to the I-85 project, or other cities, U.S. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters said.

"Starting tomorrow, we will engage with many of the largest cities in the United States that have put forward ambitious traffic fighting plans to discuss how they could use this money to cut traffic, improve transit and reduce pollution," she said in a press release.

Bert Brantley, a spokesman for Gov. Sonny Perdue, said he was checking to see how New York's decision not to go forward with congestion pricing - charging a fee to drive in certain portions of the city - would affect Atlanta's application.

Although the proposal was rejected last August in favor of congestion relief plans by New York, Miami, Minneapolis, Seattle and San Francisco, the state again applied for funding for the toll lanes in December.

The new proposal asks for \$165 million to convert current high-occupancy vehicle lanes to the toll lanes, of which the state would pay for 20 percent. The initial request asked for \$130 million, but that number ballooned to more than \$300 million as the program's scope expanded. The current application focuses on a smaller area.

The Department of Transportation had not announced when funds would be awarded, saying only it would happen in fiscal year 2008.

Brantley said previously that he had heard only praise for this region's HOT lane project, which would incorporate tolling, transit, telework and technology components.

According to the initial proposal, single drivers would be charged a variable price to enter the lane depending on congestion and the time of day, while carpools of three or more who entered the toll lanes would be able to drive for free.

The system would also include credits for commuters and the addition of more buses and park-and-ride lots.