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Northern Arc project may live again
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Gainesville – The Northern Arc, or some version of it, may be resurrected.

State Department of Transportation Commissioner Harold Linnenkohl told the DOT board Thursday that his engineers are searching for an east-west corridor farther north than the one that fell to public pressure in 2003, and they're getting close.

He said he expects to see a possible route "within a couple or three months." It will be preliminary, he said, an "internal engineering thing" DOT hasn't yet inspected, much less studied in detail.

Board member Sam Wellborn said the Northern Arc is the most important needed project, and suggested most board members would agree with him.

"It's ridiculous," Wellborn said after the meeting, to "have to go to the south [to I-285] to have to get back to the north. Think of the congestion that would relieve."

Rumors have flown about resurrecting the Northern Arc, or some re-drawn version, ever since Gov. Sonny Perdue declared it dead and buried following a grass roots resistance campaign.

DOT Board Member David Doss included a northerly version in his "Big Idea" collection of projects he hopes the legislature will fund with a statewide sales tax. But this would be a concrete step taken by the agency that currently has the most power to advance it.

Even if all stars align, Linnenkohl said, he doubts DOT could have a project ready to present to the board within the year.

The subject came up in the DOT's board meeting in Gainesville, where board members suggested the project be done under the "public-private initiative" law, as a highway financed by private companies who get paid back by tolls.

So far, the corridor would take a somewhat straight line east from the Adairsville/Calhoun area on I-75, Linnenkohl said. It would hit "somewhere along Ga. 400 near Cumming." He said then the challenge is to get it around Lake Lanier to get to I-85.

Another option in the background is letting private companies find a route acceptable to the state that the companies are willing to finance, to be repaid through tolls.

Though all funding options are on the table, as a practical matter the state can't build it with gas taxes.

"We don't have the money to build an east-west connector," said Board Chairman Mike Evans, who thinks the project is crucial. "So it falls right into a category, in my opinion, of perfect" for some form of private investment and tolls.

In other business Thursday, the board approved the promotion of Gerald Ross, who apparently will be the first African-American chief engineer in the department's history. Ross, a 25-year veteran of the department, currently is director of planning, data, and intermodal development.