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**Pricetag surpasses \$4B**  
**Kelly Brooks - Staff Writer**

MARIETTA - Highway widening and construction of bus rapid transit and truck-only lanes along the Northwest Interstates 75 and 575 Corridor mostly through Cobb would cost more than \$4 billion to complete, according to a study the state released this week.

The latest price tag has some Cobb officials looking down other roads for solutions to the county's beleaguered transportation system.

Cobb Commission Chairman Sam Olens, who also serves as Atlanta Regional Commission chairman, said many people favor light rail more than bus rapid transit, because rail would prevent rider delays and be built on existing rights-of-way, which would minimize intrusion on properties around the interstate.

"When you're talking billions, you really want them to solve problems," Olens said.

The Northwest Corridor project, as outlined in a Draft Environmental Impact Statement, could add high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes, truck-only lanes (TOL), bus rapid transit (BRT) stations, park-and-ride facilities and improved local and express bus service to the corridor.

When the state hatched plans to add additional lanes to the Northwest Corridor in 2005, officials estimated project costs at just less than \$2 billion. Factoring in inflation, early estimates hit \$2.6 billion.

Even the lower figure put the plan in the record books as Georgia's most expensive transportation project in state history.

The project, from Interstate 285 north to Hickory Grove Road on I-75, and north to Sixes Road in Cherokee County was the first to win a contract under a new public-private partnership the Legislature passed in 2003 and 2005.

Nearly two years since initial estimates, and with no dirt turned on the project, construction costs have soared as oil - a key ingredient in asphalt - reaches record prices, and officials make changes to the project, each factors that have fueled a nearly \$1.4 billion increase in project cost.

Project Manager Darryl VanMeter with the Georgia Department of Transportation, which is working with the Federal Highway Administration, the Federal Transit Administration, and the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA), said despite the cost, the project still is financially feasible.

"That's a mischaracterization that the project is going to be dead or abandoned," VanMeter said.

The study made public on Monday compares a no-build alternative with four construction alternatives, each of which includes HOV and TOL lanes, and two of which include BRT lanes.

"BRT is an idea that we're advancing in this study because our study has shown this has a lot of merit," GDOT spokeswoman Carrie Hamblin said.

But Olens said requiring only a minimum of a driver and one passenger in vehicles that travel on HOV lanes would result in a "parking lot."

"My gut feeling in talking to the public is that, given the choice between HOV lanes and truck lanes, they'd want truck lanes," Olens said.

Presently, HOV lanes end just inside south Cobb near the Chattahoochee River.

"That's the idea - to extend (the) HOV system from there into Cobb," VanMeter said. "That's one of those things we've been working on through the years."

VanMeter began examining adding HOV to Cobb in 2002.

In 2004, GDOT joined with GRTA and bus rapid transit came into the equation. Truck-only lanes were included in 2005, following a study by the Georgia State Road and Tollway Authority on High Occupancy Toll (HOT) Lanes and Truck Only Toll (TOT).

VanMeter said HOV and truck-only lanes fit together as complementary systems.

"We believe they'll have benefits to the trucking industry and to the general public," VanMeter said.

Olen acknowledged the trucking industry would contest mandatory truck-only lanes, but he said a study by GRTA revealed that truck only lanes provide a significant reduction in congestion - up to 20 percent or more.

Preferences aside, Olens said Cobb must accommodate for a 10 percent annual growth in transit riders during the past four years.

"There is a thirst for more transit in our county," he said.

The Federal Highway Administration and GDOT will hold three scheduled public hearings for comment on the project.

VanMeter said project design and right-of-way acquisition should begin by 2009.

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