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Rail hopes gain steam in Marietta
Ariel Hart

Is a Marietta line in and the Athens line out for commuter rail?

No way, say Atlanta-Athens "Brain Train" advocates.

But transportation leaders were fired up Thursday because that's a plan that could possibly be implemented with newly identified funding.

A new study shows that a rail line relieving the I-75 corridor could be a lot cheaper than the line through the Emory University corridor to Gwinnett County and Athens.

Cheap enough, in fact, that a new funding idea combined with existing money could pay to build and run two lines: the whole northern line through the Marietta area and on to Cartersville, plus the Lovejoy line on to Griffin.

George Zier, a lawyer in the state attorney general's office, delivered those findings to a special meeting at the state Department of Transportation.

The committee recommended that the full DOT board, meeting next week, get its staff working on the new funding.

The new funding source is a rail line that the state already owns, which generates about \$6 million to \$7 million a year in lease payments from CSX railroad.

Leveraged correctly, that money could fill budget gaps that have bedeviled rail transit advocates, and it could significantly contribute to getting the lines built and the cars bought, Zier said.

The money currently goes to the state, so the Legislature would have to vote to give it up. On the bright side, lawmakers wouldn't be faced with appropriating money to the commuter rail every year.

"I think it's exciting," said House Transportation Committee Chairman Vance Smith, who attended the meeting. "Our ears perk up when you say no appropriations."

Smith said he would try to convene a special meeting of the transportation committee at the legislature to hear Zier's presentation.

The existing rail corridor to Athens would need double-tracking and significant reconstruction at a couple points, driving the line's cost to \$700 million, according to a study Zier cited by R.L. Banks; by comparison the Marietta line would cost about \$42 million.

Those Athens figures are fairly new and nearly double previous estimates by project advocates, of \$383 million. That only means supporters have to work all the harder to get federal funding the project will clearly need, said Georgians for the Brain Train spokesman Paul Snyder.

With the Brain Train's potential to relieve congestion in the Emory/Centers for Disease Control and Prevention area and connect top universities and bioscience programs, "it will help economic development in ways we don't think any other corridor has the opportunity to," Snyder said.

A clear winner from the presentation is the southern line through Lovejoy. Millions of federal dollars were earmarked for it years ago.

"I'm more excited than I've been at all of the meetings that I've been to prior to this," said Eldrin Bell, chairman of the Clayton County Commission and a longtime backer of the southern line