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State's transit chief to retire

His name may not be the most recognizable, but as head of DOT, Linnenkohl engineered roadways' future.

Ariel Hart – staff

You may not recognize his name, but your car knows his work.

If Atlanta's interstate commuters are driving separate lanes from truckers 10 years from now, they can thank Harold Linnenkohl.

If crews made improvements to a state road in the last four years, it's probably because Linnenkohl OK'd the contract.

If state aid flowed to a city or county for local road projects, it's because those officials likely walked into Linnenkohl's office — and he said "yes."

As the state transportation commissioner, Linnenkohl is one of the most powerful officials in Georgia government.

On Wednesday, though, after four turbulent years in that role, Linnenkohl announced he is retiring, effective Nov. 30.

"Next to the governor, the commissioner is probably the next most powerful position in the state — in any state," said Michael Meyer, an engineering professor at Georgia Tech and a former high-ranking official of Massachusetts' transportation department.

"The DOT does give out, in Georgia's case, billions of dollars a year," Meyer said. "That's a lot of jobs, that's a lot of construction ... that's a lot of improvement to the transportation system in Georgia."

Linnenkohl rose through the ranks, starting as an engineer in the department's laboratory in 1968.

In 2003, he was named commissioner of the state Department of Transportation, where he oversaw a \$2 billion budget and 5,800-person staff.

Four years later, he leaves behind a handful of separate audits targeting DOT efficiency. Those audits were commissioned by leaders of the state Senate and the House, by Gov. Sonny Perdue and by the DOT board.

And as pressure mounted for leaders to fix Atlanta's road congestion, some members of the Legislature said they won't give more money to the DOT until the agency spends it more efficiently.

The department, Linnenkohl has said, is dealing with a nationwide funding crunch brought on by a weakening gas tax and construction inflation.

Position of power

Linnenkohl's position is one of the few in state government in which approving a project here or pushing back on a project there could change so many people's lives.

So how much power does the commissioner wield?

Even though Linnenkohl and his staff are bound by state and federal planning requirements, it's up to them to study which projects should be funded and how they should be built.

And the state Legislature doesn't tell the DOT commissioner how to spend the gas tax. Instead, the commissioner has broad authority to choose which transportation projects his staff should engineer and put out to contract, under guidance of the DOT board.

The Legislature, though, has indirect oversight over the department through its election of the 13 board members, who hire and can fire the commissioner.

It's also the commissioner's job to argue for those tough decisions.

Meyer, for instance, remembers conducting a study for the State Road and Tollway Authority that put the truck-lane issue on Georgia's radar.

Studies come and go, but a few short years later, proposed truck lanes are under development for I-75 in Cobb County and are being studied for other highways.

"There were many people within the DOT that didn't think that was a good idea," Meyer said. "He grabbed a hold of that, took the ball and ran with it."

'It's time' to move on

The four years of Linnenkohl's leadership have seen shifts in Georgia's transportation planning, with a new focus on toll roads, funded with private investment.

"Commissioner Linnenkohl led the Department of Transportation through many challenges through the years, and dedicated his career to advance Georgians' quality of life through transportation solutions," the governor said in a statement.

Linnenkohl's term has also been marked by tension between him and the DOT board.

David Doss, a member of the agency's board who formerly served as chairman, said Linnenkohl made improvements at the DOT, but it might take someone from outside the DOT structure to implement the overhaul suggested in the efficiency audit.

Linnenkohl, 58, has been with the DOT nearly 40 years. In an interview Wednesday, he said he had finally come to his decision "simply because it's time."

It's too early to say who might replace him.

Names floated recently included Gena Abraham, who heads the Georgia Building Authority.