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State Reps to GDOT: We want commuter rail
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The Georgia House of Representatives has overwhelmingly voiced support for commuter rail.

A resolution, "urging the Georgia Department of Transportation to implement commuter rail service connecting Macon, Atlanta, and Athens," was passed 143 to 12 on April 2, during the last week of the legislative session.

Resolution author John Heard (R-Lawrenceville), said he was not surprised at the vote, even though alternative transportation, and its funding, have been divisive issues in Georgia politics. Heard said the resolution, which is non-binding, was signed by 60 people before he stopped accepting signatures.

"It's time for a paradigm shift," the Lawrenceville legislator said. "We have got to disengage ourselves from the automobile. You can't pave enough to handle the load to get people around."

According to Heard, GDOT needs to refocus its transportation priorities and start dedicating more funds to implementing and operating the proposed commuter rail line, which would run from Athens to Atlanta to Macon.

The rail has been studied since the mid 1990s and there are federal funds dedicated to the first leg of the line, south from Atlanta into Clayton County. GDOT has the funds to start the leg of commuter rail, but there has been no money dedicated to operating the proposed train after the first three years. Many rail line supporters have been seeking alternative funding sources and mechanisms to pay for the train's operation, but Heard's resolution stops at urging GDOT to do more. He says there's nothing wrong with the way we pay for transportation projects, but we need to dramatically adjust the way we think about transportation.

David Spear, spokesman for GDOT, said the resolution reflects what's already happening at the department. Citing Intermodal Committee Chairman Larry Walker, Spear said "the department needs to stop waiting for someone to walk in and say, 'Here's a couple of million dollars.' We need to be more aggressive in finding solutions."

The State Transportation Board has instructed the department to move forward with the rail and find funding solutions. The department is also "honing its focus," under new GDOT Commissioner Gena Abraham, Spear said, and there is a "whole reprioritization" underway on all of the department's 9,000 proposed projects.

The funding dedicated to implementing the first stretch of commuter line into Clayton County is secure, though GDOT still needs some guarantee of future operating funds.

"The big stumbling block here is guaranteeing the operating funds after the third year," Spear said. "If [House lawmakers] want us to move forward on this, and I take them at their word that they do, we hope they'll help us find some funding."

Even though the resolution does not solve the commuter rail's financial problem, some see the vote as a significant step towards the implementation of the line.

Paul Snyder, with Georgians for the Brain Train, a group promoting the commuter rail and trying to develop a creative funding mechanism, said the resolution "shows that we're on track" and loudly sends the message, "don't kill commuter rail."

"We're closer to the consensus support that we need to get to commuter rail than we've been in the last two years," Snyder said. "We've frittered around and waited so long ... There are so many more avenues of funding which become available if we just start rolling somewhere."

Some staunch critics of commuter rail, however, see the resolution as essentially meaningless and as a way legislators can say they support the idea without actually doing anything.

"There was no debate, no discussion," said Steve Davis (R-McDonough), who was one of the 12 to oppose the resolution in the House. "This is more like a privilege resolution. They don't do anything. They don't mean anything."

Davis said the commuter rail resolution was hidden in a list of "uncontested" resolutions, like those which formally honor someone.

Even if 142 House representatives support commuter rail and urge GDOT to move forward, Davis said it would still mean nothing.

"We can urge them all we want," he said, "but the point is they can't build it unless they have a funding source."