

January 25, 2008

Marietta daily Journal

Editorial: Is it time for bottom-up transportation plan?

'We've been talking about transportation for years ... and nothing has been done other than study it and study it and study it. It's time for us to quit studying stuff and do something.'

Smyrna Mayor Max Bacon, at a recent legislative forum.

Bingo! Mayor Bacon could not have summarized the situation more clearly when it comes to the metro area's traffic congestion - and what's being done about it, or more precisely, what's not being done about it.

We've seen transportation studies (and governors, and DOT commissioners) come and go as often as Atlanta Falcons coaches, and at the end of the day, the public is still stuck in traffic - and the Birds are still stuck in last place.

Some things never seem to change.

We're now starting the sixth year of the Perdue governorship, and have yet to see anything that most people would define as "leadership" on transportation - which, at least until the drought came along - was generally considered the most pressing problem facing the metro area. And with quarterback Perdue content to sit on the bench, there's no one calling plays. And neither the state DOT board, the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority, the Atlanta Regional Commission or the state Road and Tollway Authority have been able to rouse the state team to action or come up with a plan.

It's hard to tackle transportation issues without a plan. We have so many cooks in the transportation "kitchen" that they would spoil the soup - if they could ever find the stove.

FORMER GOV. ROY BARNES had envisioned a combination of light rail and HOV lanes, plus the Northern Arc limited access highway between Interstates 75 and 85, as the keys to tackling congestion.

But light rail went by the boards when Perdue was elected. For the first few years of his term the governor and his team were touting Bus Rapid Transit as the answer to congestion.

Cobb Board of Commissioners Chairman Sam Olens (who also ably chairs the Atlanta Regional Commission) went along with the scheme, explaining later that the state made clear that funding-wise, that it was either BRT or nothing.

BRT would have been horrendously expensive. Without much right-of-way to work with, the state was considering building elevated bus stations atop I-75 at several Cobb locations.

Olens is now favoring light rail, which makes more sense than BRT would have. But there's no question that light rail would pose similar financial and ridership challenges. Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle noted during a recent visit with the MDJ editorial board that population densities in the 75 corridor are not high enough to sustain light rail there. And even if such a line were built, it would require a great expansion in the bus lines that service the stations. Otherwise, how would riders travel from the station to their ultimate destinations, and vice-versa? You can be sure there wouldn't be many coming and going by foot under a Georgia summer sun.

If light rail were built in Cobb, where else would it go? Eastward along the I-285 corridor to Perimeter Center? Downtown Atlanta? Would it tie into MARTA rail? It would make no sense to have a Cobb-only light rail system, any more than the line proposed by then-Commission Chairman Bill Byrne in the mid-1990s that would have gone from Town Center mall to Cumberland Mall - and no further. If light rail is going to be built in Cobb, it must be part of a metro-wide system.

Meanwhile, plans to add High Occupancy Vehicle and truck lanes to I-75 and I-575 are on hold. New state DOT Commissioner Gena Abraham said earlier this month her staff lacks the expertise to conduct negotiations with the contractors brought on board as part of a public/private partnership to add the lanes in Cobb and Cherokee counties, which for some reason got the short end of the stick when HOV lanes were added to metro freeways in the 1990s.

RATHER THAN FRETTING about how to pay for transportation improvements, and rather than wasting time on a pie-in-the-sky regional transportation SPLOST (a SPLOST on top of a SPLOST, i.e., a sales tax on top of a sales tax - something voters are almost guaranteed to turn down), the top priority should be to come up with a viable transportation improvement plan.

In the absence of leadership from the governor's office and "alphabet agencies" downtown, perhaps it's time for local leaders in Cobb, Cherokee, Paulding and Bartow - the I/75-575 corridor - to come up with a common transportation agenda.

If state leaders aren't interested in devising a plan to tackle transportation issues, we should come up with our own, a "bottom-up" plan as it were. Enough of what east Cobb Commissioner Tim Lee recently referred to as the "analysis paralysis."

As Mayor Bacon put it, "It's time for us to quit studying stuff and do something."