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**A penny for your thoughts and metro roads too**

**Russ Bynum** - Associated Press Writer

House Republican leaders introduced a proposal Thursday developed by the Georgia Department of Transportation for a 1 percent sales tax hike to raise \$22.2 billion over 10 years for transit projects ranging from new highways in metro Atlanta to paving dirt roads in rural Georgia.

Taxpayers would have the final say in a statewide vote on whether to raise their sales taxes, which are already maxed out at 7 percent in all but a dozen of Georgia's 159 counties.

The plan has the support of key lawmakers, including the heads of the transportation committees in both the House and Senate. The Legislature would likely vote next year whether to place it on the 2008 ballot.

"I'm excited about this plan," said state Rep. Vance Smith, chairman of the House Transportation Committee. "This is going to be a group effort and we're going to try and solve any transportation problems."

Penny sales taxes have proven popular in Georgia - where local governments can add up to 3 percent to the state's 4 percent share - for new schools, civic centers and improving roads and sewer systems where voters can see a direct benefit.

But local officials say persuading voters statewide to raise their taxes could prove a tougher sell, especially if Georgians doubt they'll gain personally.

"There is not enough money available for all these projects, and some of them are really critical," said Chatham County Commission Chairman Pete Liakakis. "But it's a matter how it's going to be explained to people. How is it going to put money in their pockets?"

Proposed uses of the tax include \$3.6 billion to widen state highways across rural Georgia, \$190 million annually to resurface local roads, and to double spending on traffic signals and other local improvements to \$90 million a year.

The plan also calls for \$1.52 billion to pave about 29,000 miles of dirt roads across the state, \$40 million annually to resurface more than 100 state airports and \$2 billion to fix about 1,600 crumbling bridges.

But a major concern of voters, particularly in rural Georgia, will be whether they get a fair share of improvements compared to money that goes to aid traffic-choked Atlanta.

"People think that, when something like this happens, most of the money gets funneled into the Atlanta metro area and we don't get it down here," said Mayor Ronnie Dixon of Vidalia.

Plans for metro Atlanta include spending \$4.5 billion over a decade for the state to pick up operating costs of MARTA, the city's transit system. There's also \$500 million proposed to fund a streetcar system from downtown Atlanta to the suburbs.

But many of the DOT plan's big-ticket Atlanta items rely heavily on private funding and revenues from new toll roads. That includes \$6.2 billion to add six lanes of highway downtown and \$10.7 billion to build a web of optional toll lanes throughout metro Atlanta. There's also a \$4.3 billion proposal for a 60-mile East-West connector north of the city.

David Doss, the DOT board member who developed the plan, said raising sales taxes seemed more viable than hiking Georgia's 7.5-cents-a-gallon gasoline tax, which lawmakers have long been hesitant to change.

"If there is a favored way to tax yourself, this seems to be the way to do it," Doss said of the penny sales tax.

Not everyone agrees. Waiting on a bench while his wife shopped at a department store at Savannah's Oglethorpe Mall, Bob Futch said the 7 percent he pays in sales taxes is enough.

"Things do add up," said Futch, a 59-year-old manufacturing plant manager from Nashville in south Georgia. "I'm against any new taxes, because once they get it, it never seems to go away."

Sharing a pretzel with her 2-year-old son at the mall, Sue Rowe of the Isle of Hope near Savannah said she'd be willing to pay for better roads and easier travel.

Rowe particularly liked a proposed \$1.5 million feasibility study to examine building a magnetically levitated train between Savannah, Macon and Atlanta - which Doss said would be capable of speeds up to 310 mph.

"It would improve Atlanta tourism as well as ours," said Rowe, a 34-year-old hospital worker. "It would be worth a penny on the dollar to deal with my son on a two-hour trip rather than a five-hour trip" from Savannah to Atlanta.

Associated Press writer Greg Bluestein in Atlanta contributed to this story.