

Adding lanes no way to go

Wider roads mean more traffic

By **BRIAN GIST** and **JIM GRODE**

Atlantans hardly need a group of researchers to tell them that traffic in the region is a mess. But a recently released study of transportation patterns shows just how bad it is.

Our average commute time is 31.2 minutes, five minutes longer than in 1990, the highest increase in the country. We have three of the worst bottlenecks in the country. Less than 4 percent of Atlantans take transit to work.

So, not only does Atlanta have some of the worst traffic in the country, but also our attempts to build our way out of congestion are failing.

Urban planners say traffic congestion can't be eliminated simply by building roads. Atlanta's decades-long love affair with more and bigger highways has proved them correct. Wider highways increase capacity, which encourages sprawl, generating more traffic, and pretty soon those wider highways are clogged with traffic.

The solution to traffic congestion in a modern urban center such as Atlanta lies in transportation alternatives, not more highways. We must focus on efforts that reduce the number of vehicles on Atlanta's roads, increase access to and coverage of the mass transit network and make land-use decisions that allow people to live near transit, jobs and shopping. Building smarter rather than larger will also help relieve Atlanta's air quality problems by reducing tailpipe pollution.

The study, *Commuting in America III*, by the Transportation Research Board comes as state and federal transportation agencies are considering a slate of major new projects intended to alleviate traffic congestion in metro Atlanta, such as expanding I-75 and I-575 in Cobb and Cherokee counties. Several scenarios are proposed for the proj-



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ect, some of which include positive elements such as increased use of bus rapid transit and new transit stations to serve these buses.

But one serious failing in the expansion proposal is the lack of rail-based projects. The stability provided by rail infrastructure can fundamentally change metro Atlanta's land-use patterns, allowing the region to proactively guide growth, rather than react to it. As long as Atlanta builds roads

rather than rails, we will always be a step, or more, behind our transportation problems.

Even more troubling, however, is that the scenarios call for adding as many as eight lanes to I-75, creating 23-lane-wide portions of concrete — wider than the length of a football field.

These new lanes will do little or nothing to reduce the number of vehicles on the road. And in a twist that shows just how foolish our transportation planning has become, the new lanes will end at the junction of I-75 and I-285, one of the worst traffic bottlenecks in the country, as the commuting study identified. All the vehicles in the new lanes will have to rejoin the existing lanes, making the bottleneck even worse. Further, the proposal also calls for between four and six new lanes elsewhere in the 75/575 project area. None of these additional lanes will solve the

congestion problem. They will just relocate it, and probably make it worse.

Here's another wrinkle: Georgia is facing a massive deficit in its transportation budget. According to the Statewide Transportation Plan, currently proposed projects will cost almost double what the state has to spend. The last thing we should be doing is spending our scarce transportation dollars on highway projects that will all too quickly worsen our traffic crisis and air quality.

The I-75/575 proposal, and all projects intended to avoid gridlock, must be given a hard look to ensure they will actually reduce congestion and not perpetuate the cycle of unnecessary highway construction that created Atlanta's traffic crisis in the first place.

These projects frame the critical question that will determine Atlanta's transportation future: Will we simply continue to build larger highways, or will we realize that Atlanta's congestion problem can only be solved by building smarter?

The public will have a critical opportunity to weigh in on the I-75/I-575 proposal when the draft environmental study is released this year.

Atlantans must demand that the transportation agencies charged with making these decisions stop building bigger and more highways, and start building a smarter transportation future. Let's not find out 10 years from now in another study that we have added yet another five minutes or more to our commute.