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Gwinnett Village to hear light rail study results

By Jamie Ward
Staff Writer

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Special Photo

This artist's rendering shows a light rail stop in Gwinnett, Gwinnett County."

LAWRENCEVILLE - The possibility of light rail in Gwinnett County will be the topic of a presentation today to the Gwinnett Village Community Improvement District's Board of Directors.

The presentation stems from a light rail conceptual study commissioned by the Gwinnett Village and Gwinnett Place CIDs in September. It came as the result of a previous study that said ridership projections along the proposed Interstate 85 corridor between Doraville and the Gwinnett Place Mall far exceeded expectations.

"We are excited to see the results of this study," said Gwinnett Village CID Director Chuck Warbington. "It's the first step of many toward building an effective regional transportation system in Gwinnett County. Our goal is not only to ease congestion for Gwinnett commuters, but also to spur economic development and revitalization throughout the southwestern portion of

Gwinnett Place CID Director Joe Allen said his CID shares Warbington's view and would probably hear the light rail presentation next month.

"Transit is a part of the urban lifestyle and has to be a part of a more maturing community," Allen said. "And we're also excited about it from the perspective of redevelopment in the southern portion of the county."

Warbington and Allen said the decision to commission the study on light rail came after a previous study and opinion poll indicated that Gwinnettians felt traffic congestion was the most significant problem in the county. That same poll said a majority of Gwinnettians supported the development of alternate modes of transportation in Gwinnett.

"The study and poll let us know right away that the demand and need were there, but that we had to find an alternative to heavy rail in this particular corridor both from a cost perspective as well as when it would be open for use," Warbington said.

The previous study indicated that heavy rail, such as the MARTA system, would cost \$150 to \$250 million a mile and could take as long as 20 years to complete. Light rail on the other hand has a lower capacity and lower speed than heavy rail, but would only cost \$50 to \$90 million a mile and wouldn't take as long to finish. Light rail does offer higher capacity and a higher speed when compared to a street-running tram system, though.

The current light rail study examined routes and possible alternatives along MARTA's Concept 3 transit plan, which stretches from the Doraville transit station to the Gwinnett Arena. It focused on basic ridership forecasts, environmental screening and estimated capital and operating costs.

Gwinnettians voted down bringing MARTA and its heavy rail system to the county in both 1965 and 1990. Warbington thinks the situation today is different, though, and he cited the 323,647 registered vehicles in the county in 1990 to 2007's number of 647,952 as a reason for needing a light rail transit system.

"Gwinnett did not have mobility issues back then and we are now more than double that size and fast approaching 1 million people in the next eight to ten years," he said. "Gwinnett, especially the southern part, is considered urban and solutions to mobility issues in urban settings should include transit alternatives."