



County has big plans for I-85

By David Wickert
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

5:00 a.m. Sunday, January 22, 2012

Gwinnett County is moving forward with plans to redesign two key I-85 interchanges, routing drivers into the left-hand lanes to improve interstate access and alleviate traffic congestion.

The county this month solicited applications from companies interested in revamping the interchanges at Jimmy Carter Boulevard and Pleasant Hill Road. Formal bids are expected in the next few months.

The new interchanges are one of several Gwinnett initiatives — including connecting Ronald Reagan Parkway to I-85 and a mass transit study — designed to address congestion along one of metro Atlanta's busiest highways. Local business leaders hope the interchanges also will spark nearby development and attract shoppers who avoid the congested areas.

"I think it's a wonderful idea," said Lilburn resident Janet Tobin, who steers clear of the Pleasant Hill interchange. "The traffic in that area is awful."

More than 260,000 vehicles travel some parts of I-85 in Gwinnett County on an average day. At rush hour, traffic often slows to a crawl.

Just getting onto I-85 can be frustrating for commuters using the Jimmy Carter and Pleasant Hill interchanges. Traffic sometimes backs up nearly half a mile to turn left onto the interstate. Drivers who aren't trying to get on to the interstate also endure long waits to get across the bridges.

"The traffic is bumper-to-bumper" on Pleasant Hill Road, Tobin said.

Completely new interchanges would help but would cost tens of millions of dollars. Instead, Gwinnett officials will use a relatively cheap fix: They'll spend about \$8 million to convert the two bridges into "diverging diamond" interchanges.

Under the design, traffic on Jimmy Carter and Pleasant Hill will be routed into the left-hand lanes across the I-85 bridges before switching back to the right-hand lane on the other side. Gwinnett officials say the design will make it easier for motorists to turn left onto I-85, reducing congestion and improving safety.

It's a design first used in Missouri in 2009 and adopted since then in a handful of other U.S. locations. The first diverging diamond interchange in Georgia — at the intersection of Ashford-Dunwoody Road and I-285 — will be finished this fall.

Gwinnett Deputy Transportation Director Alan Chapman said construction on the Pleasant Hill

