

Toll lane plan has its allies

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LAWRENCEVILLE — Even if the Braves game to which he was headed was in the second inning, Michael Adkins still wouldn't pay an optional toll on Interstate 85 that might get him to the stadium faster.

"I'd get there in the fourth inning," he said. "I'd just as soon plan ahead." But Adkins said he thinks other people would use high-occupancy toll lanes, proposed last week for a span of Interstate 85 in Gwinnett County when a consortium of state agencies filed a federal grant request Monday.

The HOT lanes, as they are known, would replace high-occupancy vehicle lanes on I-85 from Interstate 285 to Old Peachtree Road if a federal grant request for \$74.4 million is approved next month.

The 14.3 miles of lanes would be free for buses, motorcycles and vehicles with at least three people. Other drivers would be able to pay a variable rate — depending on the time of day and the amount of congestion — to access the restricted lane. The rest of I-85 would remain free.

Cameca Fenderson, who has carpooled from Lawrenceville to Midtown for two years, said she thinks the lanes would be an excellent idea.

She thinks they would encourage more carpooling as people did whatever they could to save money on long commutes.

"I think it would be worth it with the amount of people who commute downtown," she said. "I think there are other things in the state that need to be done."

Officials said the tolls could cost \$2.75 on average. The grant proposal also includes funding for two new Park-and-Ride lots at Hamilton Mill and Cedars roads, each with the capacity for 500 cars, and 40 new buses to transport people downtown. If it is selected, the state will have to pay \$18.6 million for the project, for a total cost of \$93 million. That can be repaid over time with tolls.

Harold Linnenkohl, the Georgia Department of Transportation commissioner, said the change should allow greater reliability for people trying to get somewhere on time.

But Vince Saputo said he thinks it's a bad idea.

Saputo, who lived in Chicago before moving to Gwinnett four years ago, said

he thinks creating the HOT lanes doesn't really address the issue of what is wrong with traffic in the county.

Commuter rail would provide a real solution, he said. The HOT lane proposal simply substitutes buses for cars that are already there.

"Why I like the train is it takes you off the road, it gives you an alternative," he said. "It seems so backward to think about putting in toll lanes. It's not a solution. It's a way to make people think they're doing something."

Saputo said in Chicago, he lived three blocks from a train station — even though he was 50 miles outside the city. He questioned how people would be charged for entering the HOT lanes and how carpoolers could escape the fee, details officials are still working out.

Adkins, who drives on I-85 making deliveries five days a week, said he thinks there is a market for everything. And Lisa Anders, the marketing and communication director for the Gwinnett Convention and Visitors Bureau, said she doesn't think people would mind paying if they could get to the Arena at Gwinnett Center on time or to an important business meeting.

"If you have a toll road leading to a place people want to go, like the Mall of Georgia or the Arena, I think people in Atlanta are willing to pay for the convenience," she said. "I think it's a balance. If you're not going to get on the road for \$2.75, you might pay \$2.75 on a business trip to get to a meeting. ... If you're a business traveler, you'll take advantage of it."

Anders said the most important part of successfully implementing the HOT lanes is making sure the costs are clear.

Brian Turmail, a spokesman for the U.S. Department of Transportation, said between one and three proposals will likely be funded, of 26 received. The department is looking for solutions that can show quick results and members of GDOT, the Atlanta Regional Commission, the State Road and Tollway Authority and the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority are confident that Georgia's only submission has a good chance of being chosen. Similar lanes exist in cities such as Denver, Minneapolis, Houston and San Diego. If Georgia's are approved, officials hope they can be in place by December 2008, when a new interchange at I-85 and Ga. Highway 316 is complete, so they can be opened in tandem.

The directors of Gwinnett's three Community Improvement Districts said they are intrigued by the lanes, which they said are beneficial because getting in them is voluntary.

"I think it's a great concept," Evermore CID Director Brett Harrell said. "We could be a leader in this potentially. We have the potential to make a really big impact on congestion."

Harrell was a member of the governor's Congestion Mitigation Task Force. Joe Allen, whose Gwinnett Place CID is off of I-85, said he thinks anything that would open up another lane of traffic is a positive move.

"We can make more efficient use of the lanes we have available," he said. "I know when I was going downtown to a meeting at the ARC and the traffic wasn't moving, I would have paid \$10 or more. It gives you the option."