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'We need help now' Some on transit board say plan would delay relief

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ATLANTA - A transit concept plan for metro Atlanta released Thursday calls for the addition of myriad bus and rail options in Gwinnett and across the region.

The 30- to 50-year plan would cost more than \$54 billion to build and operate through 2030. But members of the Transit Planning Board said 30 years is too long to wait for solutions to congestion problems.

"I think we need congestion relief in some form," Gwinnett Commission Chairman Charles Bannister said. "We need help now, we need to improve transportation out there now."

Other board members said they would like to see the streetcars, rapid buses and rail systems added in the next 10 years.

The concept plan is the result of months of meetings by the planning board, which is comprised of members of the Atlanta Regional Commission, Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority, Georgia Regional Transportation Authority and 11 county leaders. The group will hold public meetings and accept input on the plan through the end of May.

In Gwinnett, the concept calls for light rapid transit or streetcars to be added between the Doraville MARTA station and Gwinnett Place Mall. Freeway bus rapid transit services would continue north on that route along Interstates 85 and 985, and two commuter rail lines would cut through the county, connecting Gainesville to Atlanta through Duluth and Peachtree Corners and linking Athens and Atlanta via Lawrenceville.

Other arterial rapid bus services would be added on the U.S. Highway 78 corridor and between Lawrenceville and Alpharetta. Regional suburban buses would connect other cities in the county with those throughout the region.

Doug Tollett, the Board's vice chair, said the plan is not perfect, but does make a good jumping-off point.

"I think it will evolve," he said. "This is not set in stone. This is what we're trying to get out to the public and get comments."

Board members discussed the problem of financing the concept, which they said would cost about \$2.2 billion a year through 2030. The legislature will consider a statewide sales tax to fund the projects, members said, and other possibilities include public-private partnerships and the creation of transit-oriented developments.

A poll will also solicit funding suggestions and help determine what passengers value in transit, including travel time and the number of times they have to transfer.

The goal, Fayette County Chairman Jack Smith said, is to make a seamless regional system.

MARTA General Manager Beverly Scott said that system will improve the quality of life in the region. Every great city has great transit, Scott said, and Atlanta should be no exception.

The city's transit system should not be a mode of transportation of last resort, she said, but one of first choice.

Bannister said despite short-term plans to make road improvements that will help in the interim, Gwinnett County's efforts will not make enough of a difference to travelers if the county works on its own.

"We have to think more regionally to get relief," he said. "Gwinnett can do everything possibly that can be done and we'd still have congestion, unless we work with our neighbors. We need congestion and transportation improvements today."

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