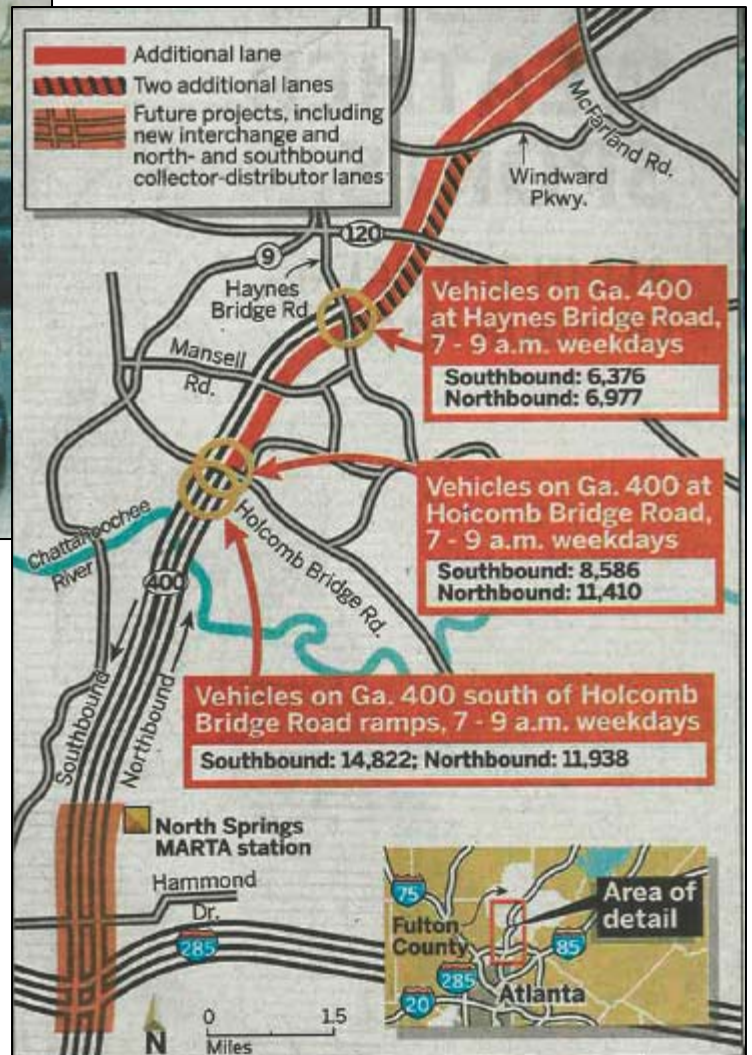
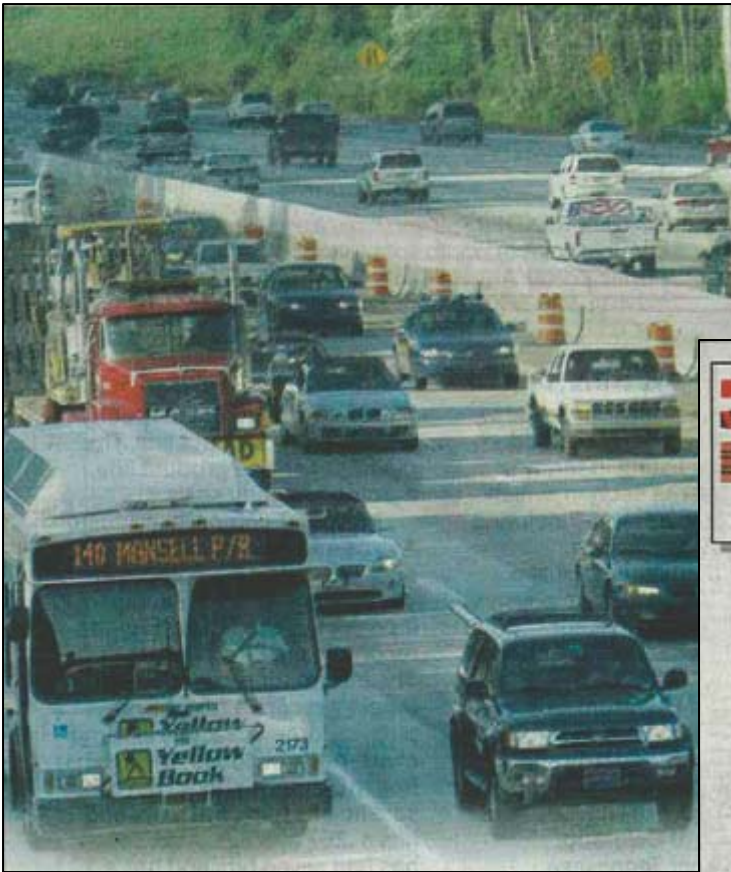


GA 400 COMING OF AGE

by Ariel Hart



Drivers on Ga. 400 who feel relief from the construction ending there should know that it's only a lull. Ga. 400 is about to be reborn or perhaps just come of age.

As northern development balloons, the state Department of Transportation will soon begin what it calls the first widening of suburban Ga. 400 since the 1980s.

It will spend \$47 million to add lanes from Holcomb Bridge Road to McFarland Road, driving the three-lane portion of the highway farther into the suburbs, into Forsyth County. Other projects on tap would spend hundreds of millions of dollars to relieve congestion where the highway hits the Perimeter.

Traffic up Ga. 400 "has just been skyrocketing," said Mark McKinnon, a DOT spokesman. "We're trying to meet that need."

The need has a twist, a long-term surprise to planners. Along with generally increasing traffic volume, Ga. 400 is in some spots showing a fundamental shift in how it is used. What used to be seen as a channel from bedrooms up north to jobs downtown seems close in places to reversing direction. At some points, it already has.

"Even in the '90s you had a 60-40 or 70-30 split" of southbound-northbound morning rush hour traffic, said Joseph Palladi, the DOT engineer in charge of statewide planning. "As north Fulton and south Forsyth and even points further north develop, and with commercial industry coming in, that has been creeping closer to 50-50. In some areas you may even have what we call a reverse commute."

"I don't think anybody expected this of the whole north side when it was first built," said Darrell Richardson, an engineer with the DOT who oversaw design of the widening.

Northbound a.m. commute

Laveeda Goldsboro is typical of this new Ga. 400 user. She doesn't drive it to shop. She doesn't commute downtown. As of two years ago, when her formerly Buckhead-based company sought cheaper rent in Alpharetta, she commutes north, from Stone Mountain to Ga. 400's Windward Parkway exit. She makes the classic Atlanta commuter lament, but with her back to the city.

"It takes me an hour and a half to two hours to get home," she said, holding a soda on Sunday in the lobby at Windward Pointe, the new digs for her company, Voicecom. "I wasn't happy at all" about the office move, Goldsboro said. But like the downtown commuter, she suffers the drive to follow her job. She hasn't quit, and she said she's not about to move out of Stone Mountain.

The growth north of the Perimeter is "explosive," said Brandon Beach, president of the Greater North Fulton Chamber of Commerce. Beach recalled 13 years ago driving south into Atlanta and looking at the other, free-flowing side in envy. That disparity is a thing of the past, he said. "Some people don't like to add capacity to the roads. But we have to, just to handle what we've got, much less the growth that's expected. It could strangle us."

The chamber's offices are in Alpharetta, the poster child for the Ga. 400 boom. Alpharetta's population nearly tripled between the last two censuses, to 35,000. But that's just the residents who sleep there at night. The town estimates its daytime population at 120,000, said James Drinkard, economic development coordinator for the city. He said the city added 29,000 new jobs from 1999 through 2004.

Traffic follows jobs

The city of Atlanta's projections show 4,000 new jobs for the same period, according to the Atlanta Development Authority.

The traffic flows accordingly. The chamber's street, Haynes Bridge Road, marks a point on Ga. 400 where on average nearly 7,000 vehicles flowed northbound from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. every weekday last year. Southbound, it was fewer than 6,400, according to the DOT.

Congestion is keeping pace. As increases in travel times for southbound morning commuters level off, northbound drivers are seeing "huge jumps" in how long their drive takes, said Mark Demidovich, assistant state traffic operations engineer for Georgia. Jane Hayse, chief of transportation planning at the Atlanta Regional Commission, noted that I-75 and I-85 are seeing congestion at northbound rush hour too, "but not to the rate it is on 400." And compared to those two interstate freight funnels, Ga. 400 is a highway that goes nowhere, ending near Dahlonega.

Familiar territory

Ga. 400 has been widened before, in the 1980s. It was born in 1968, heading north from I-285, according to the DOT. The part inside the Perimeter was opened in 1993. That extension was funded by tolls, which the State Road and Tollway Authority expects to keep collecting until 2011.

The Ga. 400 lane widening soon to start will add more lanes northbound than south. There will be a total of four northbound lanes up to Windward Parkway and three southbound lanes from McFarland Road to Holcomb Bridge Road.

DOT would like to add another southbound lane from Holcomb Bridge Road to Haynes Bridge Road like it's doing on the northbound side. But keeping a dedicated entrance lane for the traffic pouring south from Holcomb Bridge Road onto Ga. 400 was more important, and doing the one would have meant messing with the other, said Darrell Richardson of the DOT.

That is one spot where the morning split is still solidly southbound, as is the toll plaza traffic, according to the State Road and Tollway Authority. But more than half of the traffic charging into the Perimeter never heads downtown, Palladi said. It is deflected onto the Perimeter east and west, another soaring development area.

Heading from her new glass building into the spacious parking lot for her commute home, Goldsboro was happy to hear about the projects, even though "it will probably create more development," she noted, which may well be true, according to planners. But still, she said, "It has to be done, because people are going to come out, regardless. People are going to come out."

'They'll get my house'

Eston Chastain sees it coming. He's philosophical; when Ga. 400 cut eight acres out of his father's fallow farmland just north of Cumming, it gave them the money to move into a trailer and turn their aging house into a little flea market, the Remember When Country Store. That was 1979, and business was good for a while. But then the traffic got too fast and thick for customers to slow down. Not that that stops the tax man from saying Ga. 400 makes his land worth more, he said.

Now Chastain, 71, stands in the doorway to his century-old, hand-built wood store, gaunt and whiskered in overalls and a thin button-down shirt, watching the traffic whiz by.

"There'd be days when there wasn't but four or five cars," he said. He knows the widening now is supposed to stop far south of him. But he knows that won't be the end of it. "I've heard people tell me they'll get my house," he said. "They probably will one of these days."