

FOR TRAFFIC RELIEF, LOOK PAST ROADS

By WAYNE SHACKLEFORD

According to the Atlanta Regional Commission and the Transportation Research Board, the 20-county metro Atlanta population will reach 7 million by 2030, with Gwinnett County adding 400,000 people, Fulton County adding 330,000 and Henry County adding 250,000. Fulton County will add the most jobs (16,000), for a 2030 total of almost 1.14 million.

Translation: Because road construction cannot keep pace with this level of growth, the traffic congestion the region is experiencing will almost certainly worsen.

Georgia needs to implement every form of alternative transportation available, and we need to do it right now. Commuter rail, including the Atlanta-Lovejoy line and the Atlanta-Athens line (also dubbed the "Brain Train"), the Peachtree Streetcar, the Beltline, bus rapid transit and others must all be implemented in a cohesive way.

Otherwise, 20 years from now, we are not going to like the places we live, work and play. Congestion has grown particularly worse outside of I-285 and along Ga. 316. Morning and afternoon peaks are becoming longer in duration and greater in volume.

Plans for alternative transportation, including commuter rail, have been on the Georgia Department of Transportation's long-range plan for nearly two decades. If the metro Atlanta population does nearly double by 2030, as the ARC has forecasted, our quality of life and our economic vitality will suffer.

Current average daily commute times for metro Atlantans now clock in at more than 31 minutes each way. With Henry County, Gwinnett County and Fulton County leading the way in population and job growth, we might reasonably expect average commute times to double sooner than our population does.

How then does Georgia expect to compete for industry and jobs against cities such as Miami, Charlotte, Nashville, Dallas, Denver, and Orlando, whose transportation alternatives are more than a decade ahead of Georgia's? Commuter rail just started operating in Nashville.

The Miami region's commuter rail initiative (operated on CSX right of way) is successful. Denver, Dallas and

Portland have light rail in operation, while Charlotte is in the advanced stages of comprehensive regional alternative transportation planning.

Unless we tap every drop of every transit alternative to its fullest, the extraordinary economic growth the state has enjoyed will grind to a halt. Commuter rail, given existing rights of way, economies of scale and increasing willingness of railroad operators to work with commuter rail in the interest of good public policy, is an opportunity we cannot ignore to remove thousands of automobiles from our gridlocked roads.

What can we do?

First, the city of Atlanta and the state of Georgia can get together to settle ownership of the Atlanta multimodal terminal so that demolition can begin and we can build the hub of the wheel that holds all of the spokes together. GDOT has earmarked \$2 million for the demolition of the building on the site. With multiple needs for this facility, including a new permanent home for the Greyhound bus station, the Peachtree Streetcar terminus, Lovejoy line terminus and Brain Train terminus, responsible parties need to move forward.

Second, the Georgia DOT board and state Legislature can move forward on the Atlanta-Lovejoy commuter rail service.

Third, the Georgia DOT and state Legislature can begin supporting development of the second spoke to Athens (the Brain Train).

Fourth, the heads of Atlanta's regional transit and development organizations must develop a cohesive, educated, actionable plan and leadership structure to effectively and equitably address our transportation needs on a regional and statewide basis. I am encouraged with efforts under way in this regard.

Fifth, the same regional development organizations, chambers of commerce, transit agencies and members of the state Legislature can learn about the benefits of every viable transportation alternative, including commuter rail, and actively support those providing sensible, cost-effective solutions.

Sixth, get educated. When a round trip in your private automobile actually costs you more than 50 cents per mile (a very conservative number), does it really matter whether the cost of a rail ticket between Atlanta and Athens is \$5, \$6 or \$7? That same trip costs you around \$35 one-way in your car.

We need the best efforts of state transportation and legislative leaders to protect the quality of life and economic strength of our region. Our state as a whole depends upon a healthy Atlanta region.

We need much more than there is room to list here, but we have waited almost 20 years to deal with traffic congestion in the region. Do we really have to wait until the population doubles again and we spend twice as much time in our cars as we do now before we act?

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