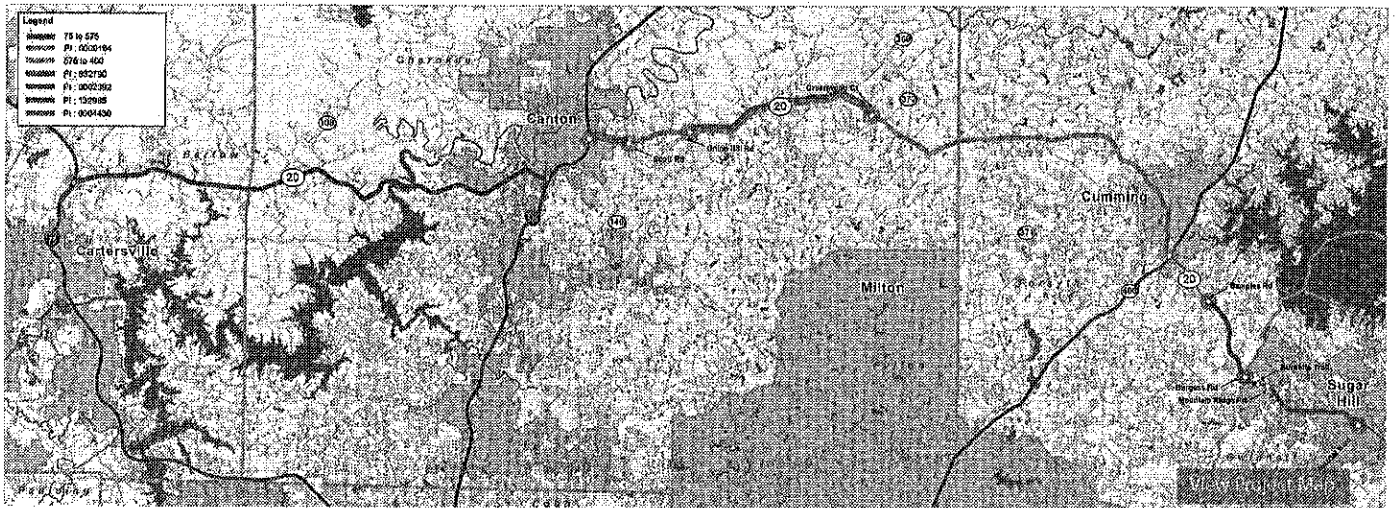


Canton to Cumming: An Update on SR 20



Current plans call for expansion of SR 20 to occur largely along the alignment of the existing roadway, an improvement over earlier plans that called for construction of a new-alignment freeway.

By Robert G. Chambers

The Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) has been striving for more than three decades to construct a new freeway across north Georgia to relieve what is primarily freight congestion on the northern sections of Interstate 285 in metro Atlanta. Their efforts have included the fabled and failed Outer Loop more than 30 years ago, the Northern Arc across Cherokee and Forsyth counties more than a decade ago, and most recently the State Route (SR) 20 Improvement project.

The SR 20 Improvement project was a segmented approach, covering more than 20 miles from Interstate 575 in Canton to SR 400 in Cumming. In GDOT's convoluted thinking, constructing a new freeway and naming it SR 20 would constitute an "improved" SR 20. This program was to be funded 80 percent by federal money and 20 percent by state dollars.

The need for federal money greatly complicated the planning and permitting stage, dragging it out for many years with extensive public involvement along the way. One important requirement was that GDOT consider the "universe" of possible solutions in a multistep pro-

cess. This evolved into consideration of widening the existing roadbed as well as studying two separate locations for a possible new freeway. Fortunately, this review period coincided with an election year at the state and local level.

The Highway 20 Coalition, a citizens' action group I was privileged to lead during its first formative year, organized to ensure that local concerns were given due consideration. The coalition adamantly opposed construction of a new freeway. We contacted every elected official from the county board of commissioners up to the state House of Representatives and Senate who represented constituents from the affected area. We also contacted all candidates for elected office in the area. Our request was that they support our opposition to the construction of a new freeway and limit work to the current roadway. All candidates and all but two elected representatives supported our position. We also received support from two candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives. A member of the state House and a state senator from the Canton area, although not opposed to our position, would not commit to support the Coalition.

The entire focus of the SR 20 project was changed when the Georgia Leg-

islature created a source of new state funds totaling about \$1 billion per year dedicated almost exclusively to roads with virtually nothing for mass transit. GDOT almost immediately announced that the SR 20 project would be funded by new state money, virtually extinguishing federal oversight of the project.

One of GDOT's first steps was to disband the Citizens Advisory Committees which were required by the federal process but not for state projects. GDOT cannot avoid federal laws like the Clean Water Act or the Endangered Species Act, but their consideration of environmental and social factors will be much less stringent without federal oversight. For example, under the federal umbrella of previous planning, GDOT submitted a 6,000-page report on historically significant features. This is not required by the state process.

GDOT Commissioner McMurry, speaking in Cherokee County a few months ago, announced that GDOT would no longer give consideration to constructing a new freeway but would focus instead on widening the existing SR 20 roadway. Apparently a four-lane, divided SR 20 will be constructed, although details remain up to the plan-

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SR 20, continued from previous page

ners as to what will actually happen, especially at choke points and in the congested confines of Cumming.

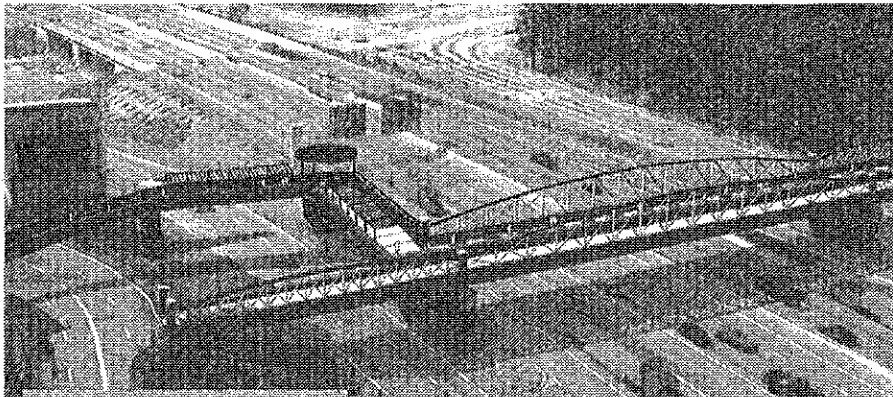
Simply widening SR 20 requires a solution to various spots prone to traffic snags in the Buffington, Macedonia, Free Home and Ducktown communities. Recent reports are that churches in Buffington and Macedonia have agreed to sell their buildings if agreeable terms are negotiated, potentially eliminating the bottlenecks in those communities. There is no word yet on solutions for Free Home and Ducktown where the problems are old buildings of some significance to the local community.

This is a good news/bad news update. The good news is that new freeways will not be built and that current congestion will be alleviated. The bad news is that the wider road will increase capacity enabling the counties to continue permitting construction of sprawl-inducing cul-de-sac subdivisions. For example, two large developments have reportedly either been approved or are in the process of permitting in the Ball Ground and Buffington communities of Cherokee County. So the sprawl will continue, the capacity will be used up and the call for more asphalt solutions will be heard again. The rural nature of northern Cherokee is in peril and only creative and foresighted leadership can forestall what appears to be its inevitable sprawl into a congested "bedroom county supplying workers to Atlanta."

Maybe it is not too late for the vision of the Chattahoochee Hills country of south Fulton County to be transported to north Cherokee County: rural landowners owning valuable development rights to be sold to developers in designated growth areas where livable/walkable communities and mass transit have a fair chance. The newly improved SR 20 is not a step in this direction, but it is not too late if leaders step forward. ♣

Georgia Sierran ♣ April/May/June 2016

Braves Relocation Causes Transit Dilemmas in Cobb County



A conceptual rendering of a pedestrian bridge that would carry Braves fans across 18 lanes of roadway traffic. Funding for the bridge is uncertain.

By Linda Bell

Transportation discussions in Cobb County revolve around the Atlanta Braves' move to the northwest Cumberland Mall area. SunTrust Park, due to open in spring 2017, sits next to the Interstates 75 and 285 interchange, and creates a complex set of congestion and transit issues.

People in Cobb County and the metro area are anxious about what will happen on game days in an area that is already choked, so multiple road projects are already underway to relieve congestion, both on the interstates and local streets. Intersection redesigns, sidewalk installations, a diverging diamond for Windy Hill Road, and widening of roads are now taking place.

In addition, the Northwest Corridor Express Lanes project will add almost 30 miles of toll lanes to Interstate 75. However, this project is designed to utilize reversible lanes with traffic being directed north in the evenings, so it does not appear this will help fans get to the game. It is also not scheduled to open until 2018.

The Braves report that there will be about 6,000 parking spaces at the stadium which seats 41,500. Estimates are

that 25,000 cars could be expected for sold-out games. Utilizing other parking in the area will require the use of a circulator bus or a pedestrian/bus bridge over Interstate 285. Officials hope that traffic will be somewhat dispersed, with people arriving and departing games at different times due to the planned development around the ballfield.

In addition, the Cumberland Community Improvement District (CID) has hired the PATH Foundation to put together a plan to make it easier to bike to the games.

What about mass transit? The closest bus connection point is the Cumberland Transfer Center, but it is almost a one-mile walk from the stadium and necessitates crossing some busy interchanges. There are plans, however, to add six buses to serve as a circulator bus system in the area which would shuttle folks along various routes.

The impending arrival of the Braves makes the need for mass transit obvious. Conventional wisdom has always been that Cobb voters won't support mass transit options. If and when massive traffic problems develop, will they support it then? Will the Braves? Will elected officials and businesses? ♣