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DOT exec reflects on completed I-985 improvements



Hall County Commissioner Billy Powell listens during a Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce function at Oakwood City Hall Tuesday.



Kit Dunlap, president of the Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce, addresses the crowd Tuesday during a function at Oakwood City Hall.



Teri Pope, spokeswoman for the Department of Transportation's Gainesville district, makes a list of road issues to be discussed Tuesday during a Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce function at Oakwood City Hall.



Georgia Department of Transportation District Engineer Russell McMurry discusses future road projects Tuesday morning at Oakwood City Hall during a Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce function. McMurry has taken a job at the Atlanta headquarters.

OAKWOOD — Traveling to see Russell McMurry speak Tuesday morning got a lot easier thanks to just-finished improvements he has overseen the past three years.

McMurry thanked his audience for their patience in dodging orange barrels and hitting the brakes during the extreme makeover of Interstate 985 at Exit 16, a \$78 million construction project that also involved adding Exit 17, building a new four-lane road and widening existing roads.

“Especially in these tough economic times, I know these impacts to your businesses are very, very important and critical for you,” said McMurry, formerly the DOT’s top engineer for the district, including Hall County, and now the state’s assistant director of engineering.

He was speaking at Oakwood City Hall as part of a meeting of the South Hall Business Coalition, an endeavor sponsored by the Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce.

The three-year project wrapped up, for the most part, when the DOT opened up the last stretch of the road, the entrance ramp to I-985 southbound from Exit 17, last week.

Workers will tidy up the project, doing “punch-list” items, for a while longer, DOT officials have said.

“That’s a very big investment,” McMurry said. “... What a difference it has made, because the growth has continued even though (the economy) isn’t so great now.”

He pointed specifically to enrollment spikes at Gainesville State and Lanier Technical colleges, which feed off I-985 and neighboring roads.

Those schools combined have about 10,000 students on campus daily. That “equates to nearly 40,000 trips because you’ve got people coming and going all the time,” McMurry said.

The road improvements are “really going to shape the growth and face of this community for a long time,” he said. “... It will be interesting to see in the next 20 years how things will (develop).”

The other DOT project under construction is the final phase of Thurmon Tanner Road, a four-lane stretch between Plainview and Mundy Mill roads in Oakwood.

The \$9.1 million project is projected to be completed next year.

Thurmon Tanner has been built in four links. When completed, the parkway will run between Atlanta Highway at Exit 17 to Phil Niekro Boulevard in Flowery Branch.

“Things are piecing themselves together and that doesn’t happen by accident,” McMurry said, adding that much planning and vision went into the work.

Thurmon Tanner, he said, will give motorists another way of traveling north and south through the county.

“You won’t have to get on the interstate to go to Lake Lanier Islands,” McMurry said, noting that Oakwood has taken the lead on the project.

“Anytime you can build a parallel road to the interstate, that is tremendous. Look what Satellite Boulevard has done in Gwinnett County. If you’ve done the planning and get the infrastructure

in place, be poised and ready for the type of growth that's already planned and zoned on that corridor.”

McMurry talked about a flurry of other road projects that are in the planning stages, including a new Exit 14 between Flowery Branch and Oakwood and the widening of Ga. 347/Friendship Road.

The Ga. 347 project will be built in two phases, between I-985 and McEver Road and I-985 and Ga. 211/Old Winder Highway.

Also, McMurry talked about improvements to Spout Springs Road, a heavily traveled South Hall artery that the county has targeted for modest intersection projects.

As for McMurry, he'll keep tabs on Hall County projects but will have a much larger load to monitor.

“I'll head up designs statewide,” he said. “My job is, all these plans we've talked about, to get (them) ready — buy the right of way and get them done.”

Todd McDuffie, district maintenance engineer, will serve as interim district engineer.

McMurry complimented McDuffie's work, adding, “I hope Todd will be a candidate (for district engineer). ... I think he's the man for the job.”

Kit Dunlap, chamber president and chief executive officer, thanked McMurry for his work in the district and presented him a plaque and umbrella as tokens of appreciation