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## **Officials starting to look beyond T-SPLOST failure**

**MPO predicts \$1.3B funding shortfall over next 30 years**

Area officials said final goodbyes last week to what would have been a funding boon for Hall County, turning instead to realistic transportation planning.

“I think we really have to regroup,” Oakwood City Manager Stan Brown said. “I know there isn’t a Plan B, but the reality is there will have to be a Plan B. We really need to focus on what our priorities are.”

Brown was addressing the Gainesville-Hall Metropolitan Planning Organization’s Policy Committee. The MPO serves as Hall County’s transportation planning entity, conducting long-range and short-range studies and working to meet federal air quality standards.

The group also was key in helping Hall’s representatives to the Georgia Mountains transportation roundtable come up with the county’s list of regional projects in the July 31 transportation sales tax referendum. Voters thrashed the referendum at the polls by a 75 to 25 percent tally.

With the defeat, Hall lost out on a \$300 million-plus pot for nine regional projects over 10 years.

“We all knew going in it was a complex legislation,” Hall Planning Director Srikanth Yamala said, referring to the Transportation Investment Act of 2010, which paved the way for the referendum.

“But, at least, throughout the public involvement process, we didn’t hear anything negative about the project list ... which assures we have a solid project list.”

Yamala said the MPO “will continue doing what we have always done,” which includes taking a closer look at the project list and working within the confines of limited funding.

The MPO operates with two major planning documents: the 2040 Metropolitan Transportation Plan and the 2012-2017 Transportation Improvement Program.

The short-range document features such projects as the widening of Ga. 347/Lanier Islands Parkway from McEver Road to Interstate 985 and the widening of Ga. 347/Friendship Road from I-985 to Ga. 211/Old Winder Highway — work that is expected to get under way this year.

The 2040 plan features mostly road-widening projects, but work also focuses on transit, intersection, bicycle, pedestrian and bridge improvements.

It cites some \$2.1 billion in transportation projects, with inflation-adjusted funding coming from projected federal, state and local sources. But Yamala has said that based on projected road needs through 2040, he estimates a funding shortfall of \$1.3 billion over the next 30 years.

“Our project list is still the same,” he said during a meeting last week of the MPO’s technical coordinating committee, a group of area planners and engineers. “We still have the same needs.

“It’s just that trying to look for an additional transportation funding mechanism will be a challenge. Regardless, it’s always important to have a plan.”

Brown said he believes that one of Hall County’s key transportation concerns should be the proposed Exit 14 off Interstate 985. Officials have long planned for a new interchange between Flowery Branch and Oakwood.

“We need that connection there ... to really complete out the work (in that area),” Brown said.

The road project, which was estimated to cost \$42.5 million as part of the sales tax list, would link H.F. Reed Industrial Parkway at Thurmon Tanner Parkway to Martin Road at Atlanta Highway.

“Exit 14 is critical to Flowery Branch, Oakwood and Hall County, the whole south end,” Brown said. “It’s a major piece.”

He said the Exit 14 area features industry and office space, including the growing Tanners Creek Business Park, as well as the Atlanta Falcons complex.

“The project is currently in design,” said Teri Pope, the Georgia Department of Transportation’s Hall County-based spokeswoman.

Some \$18 million for right-of-way acquisition is earmarked for fiscal 2016 and 2017, “but no construction funds or timeline (has been) identified,” Pope said.

Flowery Branch City Manager Bill Andrew said that his South Hall city had counted on sales tax money for its many transportation needs.

“We have about 26 miles of roads and no formal mechanism for looking at how the general fund can handle that obligation,” he said.

So, he added, local-option sales tax negotiations between Hall and the cities have risen in importance.

The tax is meant to cut down on local governments’ reliance on property tax revenue for daily operations, with negotiations occurring every 10 years over the disbursement of revenues.

City and county officials have until Sept. 21 to come to an agreement on their own and avoid mediation or a court ruling