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1st toll project proposed for I-20 east
Plan would add lanes outside I-285
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Gainesville — After months of considering which toll road projects to offer to the private sector for investment, the state Department of Transportation's staff unveiled its first proposal Thursday — an expansion of I-20 east of the Perimeter.

The project as envisioned would add two "managed lanes" each way from the eastern wall of I-285 to Turner Hill Road. Managed lanes can include optional HOV toll lanes, truck toll lanes, or other ways to restrict traffic so the lanes stay uncongested.

"I think it's a great idea," said DOT board member Robert L. Brown, whose district includes that part of I-20. "There's a great need."

When Aisha Billups, who lives in Covington and works near Mall at Stonecrest on that stretch of I-20, heard of the plan, she agreed. But any new toll lane had better stay mobile, she said.

"Everybody'd pay to be in it," she said.

The state Transportation Board heard the staff's proposal in a committee at the board's monthly meeting, which ended Thursday in Gainesville. If all goes smoothly, the department will put the project out to bid and could have proposals from private companies in just over six months.

The next step is a public information meeting on the details on Aug. 2.

Some board members voiced concern about the public-private nature of the project and DOT Treasurer Earl Mahfuz allayed fears on one point, assuring the board that a financial adviser DOT is hiring to help it through the complicated process, Royal Bank of Canada, will be signed to a contract before the request for bids goes out.

Committee Chairman David Doss expressed discomfort that the department is soliciting projects in what he called a "piecemeal" fashion, rather than laying out a whole system. Mahfuz said the I-20 project fits into a larger HOV plan developed years ago.

The three other public-private proposals under consideration were suggested by private consortiums under laws passed in 2003 and 2005, which allow companies to invest in public roads and be paid back by tolls. But those three proposals, for toll lanes on Ga. 400, I-75/I-575 and I-285, fueled growing consternation at DOT that companies could cherry-pick the most lucrative projects and leave the state to finance the rest of the

system.

The board has put a moratorium on unsolicited projects and is studying the system to prepare its own list of projects.

DOT staff also said this week they will have a public comment period of at least 30 days before they invite bids for the I-20 project. Some road developers have said that it might be wise to solicit public reaction before companies are deeply invested in a proposal. If the staff decides the comment period should be longer, it could delay the bidding process.

Questions still to be answered include whether the state or the company would possess and operate the lanes. If the state doesn't like any of the proposals it gets, it doesn't have to accept any, officials stressed.

Chanard Wells, who said he uses I-20 both as an east metro resident and an independent long-haul trucker, had one word for the project: "Perfect."

Except, he said, if they had to pay a toll, truckers would want to be able to take I-20 all the way through Atlanta.