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Metro roads and bridges face uphill battle

Atlanta Business Chronicle - by Steve Fall Contributing Writer

While Atlanta's infrastructure has not gotten any worse, it loses ground every day.

"The condition of the infrastructure seems to be about the same, but demand has grown dramatically," said Michael Meyer, director of the Georgia Transportation Institute at Georgia Tech. "So the performance of the infrastructure is deteriorating. But the actual infrastructure itself has been the same for the past several years."

Atlanta expects to welcome 2 million additional residents by 2025 or 2030.

Meyer said there isn't enough money available for the necessary infrastructure to handle that burden.

"When you have basically the same infrastructure, and you have 2 million more people demanding water, water quality, sewage treatment plants, transportation, etc., then the performance will go down unless you expand the capacity somehow."

While this summer's deadly bridge collapse in Minneapolis brought national attention to the country's aging infrastructure, the Urban Land Institute and other organizations already had been raising questions about the safety of America's roads and bridges.

Just months before the bridge disaster, the Urban Land Institute's "Infrastructure 2007: A Global Perspective" report eerily stated that "most likely, it takes ... a car-falls-through-a-bridge mishap to help us connect the dots."

According to a report by the Reston, Va.-based American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), 20 percent of Georgia's bridges are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete.

"You'd like it to be zero, but 20 percent is better than the national average," said Jeff DuFresne, executive director of ULI Atlanta.

All of this raises the question: Is a bridge collapse possible in metro Atlanta, or the state?

"Anything is possible, but I am not aware of any clear and present danger," DuFresne said. "I think that the circumstances that happened in Minnesota are unique to that particular time and place."

Meyer said Minneapolis' bridge collapse was unique to that type of design. However, he believes there has been insufficient investment in Georgia's bridges, and their condition is a

concern.

"I'm not, in any way, suggesting that bridges are going to start collapsing in Atlanta because of the one that did in Minneapolis. But it is true that if you look at the condition of bridges in Georgia, there is not enough money going into those bridges to keep the conditions anywhere near to what they are now."

Catherine Ross, director of Georgia Tech's Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development, doesn't expect metro-area infrastructure to improve as long as investment fails to keep pace with population growth and travel demands.

She also noted that the constant need to expand infrastructure comes at the expense of maintenance.

According to another report by the ASCE, Georgia's three top infrastructure concerns are roads, wastewater and mass transit.

"We have a pretty limited public transit system," said Ross. "About 3 percent of all our trips are made by transit. Where we've grown, there is little or no public transit. Even though we have a regional express bus system, we certainly would like to see that improved because it gives us some alternatives to driving."

Although the **Atlanta Regional Commission** has a \$53 billion plan to try to improve the region's mobility, that is not enough to reduce congestion in any significant way. Most of that will go toward maintaining roadways.

"If we just look at the revenue stream now we can do an adequate job of maintenance. There's very little increment over that to look at meeting this expanding capacity that we need based on the fact that we're traveling more, population is growing, etc.," Ross said.

She said the metro area must invest in commuter rail to reduce congestion on the interstates.

She also described an innovation they're testing at Georgia Tech: drivers paying higher tolls to use highways like Georgia 400 during peak travel times.

In return for paying \$2 or \$4 more than other motorists, this "value pricing" approach would provide drivers with a guaranteed ability to travel in free-flowing lanes.

Atlanta has taken some positive steps toward reducing congestion. HOV lanes have been extended outside Interstate 285. Intelligent transportation systems use surveillance and communications technology to monitor roadways and issue traffic alerts.

Smart growth along MARTA lines in Midtown and Buckhead also has helped.

"We had been the poster child of sprawl," said DuFresne. "We've seen in the last couple years a trend towards developing up and not out, with more high-density mixed-use projects intown that combine office and residential areas with shopping."

However, Meyer points out that the vast majority of the 2 million new residents will live in the

suburbs.

Before that happens, the metro area must find solutions to its transportation problems.

"If you're going to be competitive in this economy, you've got to worry about the infrastructure," Ross said. "If you don't have the infrastructure, you're out of the game. It's that simple."

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