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I-985 Exit 14 project closer to reality

\$36M set aside for project between '15 and '17

After decades of planning efforts and pushing by officials, construction of a new interchange on Interstate 985 between Oakwood and Flowery Branch appears to be on a funding track.

Some \$16 million has been set aside for right-of-way acquisition in 2015-16 and \$20 million for construction in 2016-17.

"We're looking forward to the project moving ahead," City Manager Stan Brown said. "It's a key component to ... complete a lot of the work that's been done in the South Hall area."

Past projects in the area have included running the four-lane Thurmon Tanner parallel to I-985 between Flowery Branch and Oakwood, realigning Martin Road at Ga. 13/Falcon Parkway, improvements at I-985 that included a new Exit 17, a new fire station at Ga. 13 and Martin, and a new community center off nearby J.M. Turk Road.

"All those things were done in a way that really were dependent on that interchange eventually coming into play," Brown said. "... All the sewer expansion we've done has been predicated on this project coming through."

Srikanth Yamala, director of the Gainesville-Hall Metropolitan Planning Organization, Hall's lead road planning agency, referred to the project last week as a guest speaker at a South Hall Republican Club meeting.

He said I-985 is part of Georgia's Freight Corridor Network, which was approved last August by the State Transportation Board.

A state law passed last year allowed for road in the network to be exempt from congressional "balancing," or even distribution of transportation dollars among congressional districts.

And "Hall County was fortunate enough to be able to secure funding" for Exit 14, Yamala said.

Being part of the network didn't "give it access to new funds or a new funding category," said Teri Pope, district spokeswoman for the Georgia Department of Transportation. "It just

takes the project out of ... balancing, but this project was already not constrained by balancing because interstate projects are exempt.”

Pope said the project is still in a preconstruction phase, with officials preparing an environmental assessment for the Federal Highway Administration.

The new interchange would connect to H.F. Reed Industrial Parkway at Thurmon Tanner Parkway west of I-985 and Martin Road at Ga. 13 east of I-985.

H.F. Reed leads to a heavily industrial area, including the King’s Hawaiian plant, which opened a few years ago and projects up to 600 workers as it expands. Martin Road travels past a Hall County school, Martin Technology Academy, and several subdivisions, ending at Ga. 53/Winder Highway, which leads to Interstate 85.

Also, fast-growing Tanners Creek business park runs along Thurmon Tanner Parkway off H.F. Reed.

“We think (Exit 14) is extremely important for the community,” said Alan Wayne, who co-owns Tanners Creek. “We’ve saved back some land to hopefully encourage a convention center/hotel (at the location). When you have a lot of business interest, that drives meeting rooms and things like that.”

He also believes fire protection will be greatly improved throughout Hall.

“Think about being able to put any piece of (fire) equipment on the freeway at that point,” Wayne said. “It’s the spine of Hall County.”

Otherwise, the new exit “is a huge economic project and Lord knows this country needs jobs,” he said.

Some groundwork has already been laid for future development in the area.

In March, Oakwood City Council approved a rezoning that includes 20 acres for a commercial center north of Martin Road at Ga. 13. The rest of the rezoning is tied to a 302-home subdivision, with homes projected in the \$200,000 range.

Much of the focus on South Hall transportation woes has been Spout Springs Road, south of Exit 14. A widening project is planned on the busy road, but no funding has been set aside for construction.

Still, a new Exit 14 could help draw traffic that otherwise would have used Spout Springs, said Tim Evans, the Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce’s vice president of economic development.

Last week, the chamber released an updated map showing existing industries and corresponding employment numbers.

“One of the things that changed from the last time we did this a few years ago is there’s a much higher concentration of industries in the Oakwood-Flowery Branch area,” Evans said.