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\$2B more in state funds for highways, \$0 for transit?



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In good and bad economic times, there always seems to be funding for highway expansion. Georgia Governor Brian Kemp, setting forth the priorities for his final year in office, **proposed \$2 billion in highway spending**, with the bulk of it funding express lanes on a congested section of Interstate 75 south of the city.



Interstate 75 south of Atlanta. Photo: Michael Rivera/Wikimedia Commons

On social media, reaction to the news was mixed. Some commuters looked forward to better flowing highways. Others decried the tolled express-lane idea and simply wished for added lane capacity. Others invoked now-popular memes, saying "one more lane will fix it, bro" — a sign that the reality of **induced demand**, the additional trips spurred by new highway capacity, making it self-defeating, had finally caught up with popular culture.

Meanwhile, with the World Cup mere months away, MARTA interim CEO Jonathan Hunt **took to the pages of the AJC** to tout a new fare collection system, new trains, and a bus-network redesign. The juxtaposition of the two stories got us thinking: what could MARTA and other transit agencies do with just a fraction of the highway funding everyone takes as a given?



MARTA's new CQ400 railcars, due to enter service this year.

After all, MARTA doesn't receive a penny of state funding for operations. This sets it apart from its peers. From New York's MTA to Tri-Met in Portland, Oregon, similar big-city transit systems, large and small, don't have this impediment.

Meanwhile, even when armed with the knowledge that road expansions, at best, only provide congestion relief for short periods of time, money keeps flowing for highways. The recent reconstruction of the Georgia 400 and Interstate 285 interchange had an originally reported cost of \$596 million, with the final cost reported to be **closer to \$800 million**.

Thanks to dedicated revenue, much of it flowing from Georgia's fuel tax and legally mandated to be spent only on roadways, most massive highway projects aren't required to jump through the same hoops as transit. There are generally no votes, no special bond referendums, and there are no requirements that these projects be self-supporting via fees or tolls.

What would happen, we wonder, if highways and transit were put on more equal footing? One need look no further than MARTA's **bus network redesign**, which is fundamentally an exercise in triage. Yes, frequencies will be increasing in areas with higher ridership, but only at the expense of cutting underperforming routes. But additional funding would allow MARTA to beef up bus service where needed while avoiding cuts. The agency could even try adding frequency in order to spur ridership. (After all, induced demand can also work in positive ways.)



MARTA rail at Doraville station. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

State funding could also make rail more useful and reliable, increasing frequencies during peak hours as well as on nights and weekends. And on its own, the state could invest in commuter and regional rail — like its neighbor North Carolina — to complement Amtrak's long-haul service.

MARTA could also put more resources into operator hiring and retention, directly addressing one of the biggest sources of cancellations and other reliability issues. Additional funding could also help the agency continue building proper shelters at all of its bus stops, and doing away with every stop that is merely a signpost in the dirt.

There are no shortage of plans, from **dreams** to **reality-based proposals**, to expand MARTA's footprint. Yet perhaps more could be accomplished simply by making the transit we already have more frequent and reliable, and therefore more useful. This would not just benefit those who depend on it every day, but everyone in the region if more drivers choose to take transit instead.

How about you? What would you do with an extra \$2 billion for transit? **Let us know!**

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