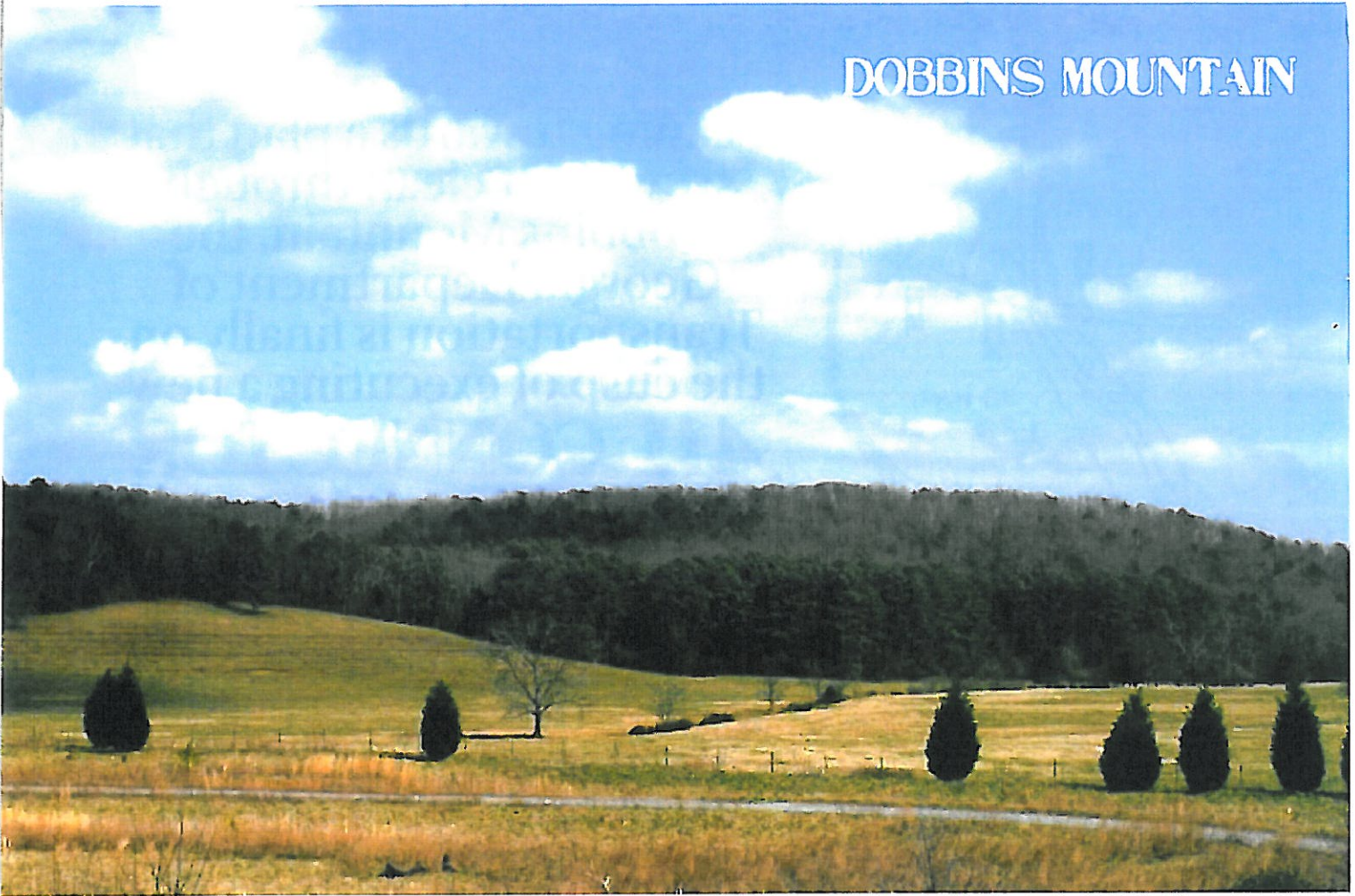


Leaning towards a plan that would cut clean through Dobbins Mountain, the Georgia Department of Transportation is finally on the cusp of executing a new **411 CONNECTOR** project. The only hiccup is that a growing number of concerned citizens across Floyd and Bartow counties believe this proposed route would be a blight on the state, both economically *and* ecologically. Perhaps the question taxpayers should be asking is whether or not it's worth

24 SECONDS

TEXT BY BRIAN FOSTER
 GRAPHICS COURTESY OF WALTER KULASH



A typical trip from Rome, Ga. to Atlanta: east on US-411 N / GA-20 E for 20 miles; exit south unto US-411 N / US-41 S / GA-20 E / GA-3 S towards Cartersville, continue for 3.7 miles; stop light, stop light, stop light, stop light...

As most travelers along this much used route know, this “stop-and-go” journey can be quite frustrating. Traffic lights, intersections, quick turn-offs and a dicey interchange make for anything but a smooth ride between our two cities, particularly for the dozens of tractor-trailer rigs that find themselves steeped in this mess each day.

Can this not be made a little easier, a little more efficient? we often wonder. Georgia lawmakers, our state representatives in Washington and the Georgia Department of Transportation have been asking these same questions for over 30 years, and they seem to be concerned—at least in posture.

It makes sense for the state to create a faster, more fluid connection between Northwest Georgia’s largest city, Rome, and

the largest city in the state, Atlanta, for the sake of commuters, tourists and burgeoning industry in the region that stands to benefit from a more efficient route. In turn, a “411 Connector”—i.e., a limited access link between the US-411 / US-41 interchange in Bartow County and Interstate 75—has long been the GDOT’s proposed solution to this problem. A direct connection between Rome and the I-75 corridor would not only provide motorists with a better route to the interstate, but would also alleviate traffic along the congested segment of US 41 south of the US 411 interchange in Cartersville.

The 411 Connector, in theory, is fairly simple and straightforward, benefiting the hundreds of motorists who make this trip daily. But, of course, it’s all in the details, and

it has been these details that have stymied this project for the last 20 years. Routes have been proposed, struck down in court, proposed again.

In recent years, the GDOT has had its eyes set on “Route D-VE”, one of the half-dozen studied routes for 411 Connector. This proposed route would continue in the east-by-northeasterly direction that US 411 is headed when it intersects US 41. After two miles, Route D-VE would sharply veer to the southeast and run parallel with Interstate 75 for roughly four miles until the highway would meet I-75 at an interchange just north of the present day GA-20 exit. Though the Georgia Department of Transportation is sweet on D-VE, another route, Route G, appears to offer a faster, cheaper and more efficient approach to I-75 and destinations either to the south or north.

A basic comparison of GDOT’s chosen route, “Route D-VE”, and an alternative route, “Route G”, is as follows:

For Route D-VE, the total cost of the project is \$182.5 million, per GDOT estimates. This will include a total of 13 bridges and overpasses, close to 6.5 miles of new four-lane freeway construction, 3.1 miles of new ramps, three traffic signals, and the relocation of a section of SR 20 and two local streets.

Route G, as per GDOT estimates, would cost a total of \$98.3 million. This route would include 6 bridges and overpasses, close to 4.1 miles of new four-lane freeway construction, a mere 1.4 miles of new ramps, and no traffic signals.

The increased time and costs that come with the engineering and construction of 13 bridges (over 1.3 miles) and 3.1 miles of new ramps are obvious, especially when compared with Route G's six bridges and 1.4 miles of ramps. What may not be so obvious, however, is the massive cut that will have to be made through Dobbins Mountain in order to facilitate the project.

Dobbins Mountain is the focal point of an over 1,800-acre private farm and forest preserve, Cartersville Ranch, LCC, owned



by the Rollins family. It sits directly at the end of Route D-VE, and is considered by some to be an illogical obstacle for the GDOT to battle in its attempt to execute the 411 Connector. From an engineering standpoint, the geologic composition and sheer size of the mountain will pose a challenge to the proposed cut—technically, environmentally *and* financially. “Over 5 million cubic yards of earthwork for this project on a seven-mile road,” explains Chris Harrell, a Civil Engineer with Summitt Engineering Consultants in Alpharetta. “One million cubic yards of that estimate is for the cut through Dobbins Mountain. It’s hard to describe how big it will be....a 10

to 12 story building. It’s over 800 feet wide at the top, wide enough to fly four 727s through. Blasting of the rock is massive; it’s going to be costly and an environmental nightmare.”

As a feat of engineering, the cut into Dobbins Mountain would be rather impressive, but Harrell believes that this destruction is entirely unnecessary. “There are only two other cuts in Georgia, that I know of, that are this big and this deep,” he says, “and there is a reason for that. It is because they should be avoided. They are expensive from a civil engineering standpoint, they are hard to do, and the impact on the groundwater and the... community is significant. This cut, if the DOT is allowed to do this, will have a name... Geologists will visit it, and it will be something that [Georgians] are not going to be proud of.”

Clearly, you would think a ride down Route D-VE must be a faster trip than the one along Route G to warrant such cost and construction by the GDOT. But based on engineering estimates that calculate the travel time along both routes between the US 411/ US 41 interchange and the US 20 / I-75 interchange, the travel time along Route D-VE would be a meager 24 seconds faster than that of Route G.

Twenty-four seconds.

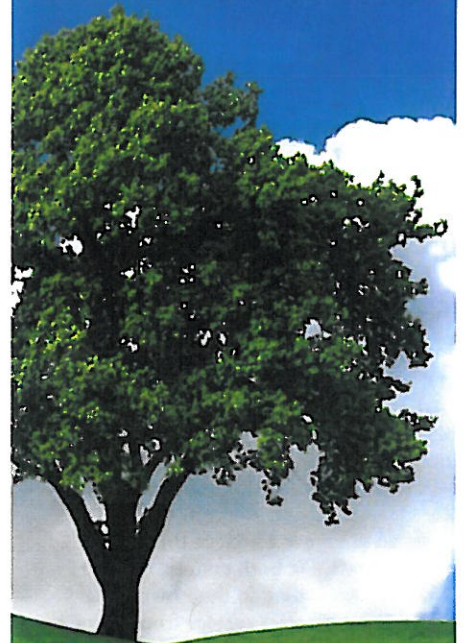
Leaving the question, is this an efficient enough improvement to justify the massive difference in cost between the two routes?

This May, before a group of dozens of concerned citizens, Walter Kulash, a nationally recognized

professional traffic engineer with over 30 years experience and an expert in the field of livable traffic, voiced his concerns regarding GDOT’s proposed route for the 411 Connector. “The stated purpose of the project, going way back...” said Kulash, “had two simple things: a better route from Rome to Atlanta via the interstate, and to relieve the congestion on the existing route. This makes a lot of sense with the combination of 411 and 20. [The GDOT and I] are fully in agreement with the purpose in need, and we are fully in agreement of the need for a connection from Rome to the interstate and to relieve the traffic. The DOT has analyzed both [Route G and DV-E, and they are]

Once upon a time...

Begins in July.

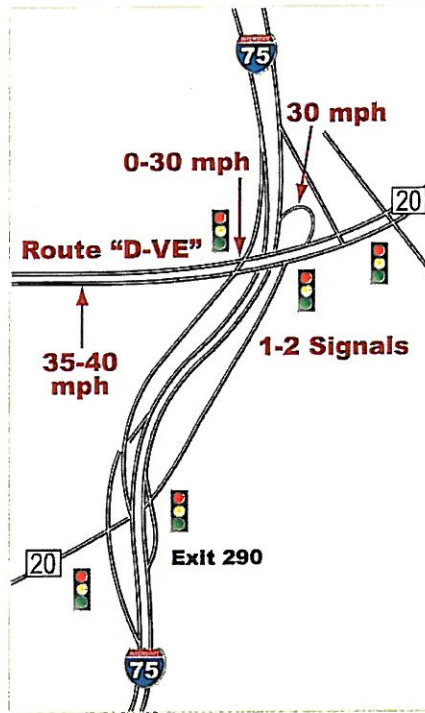
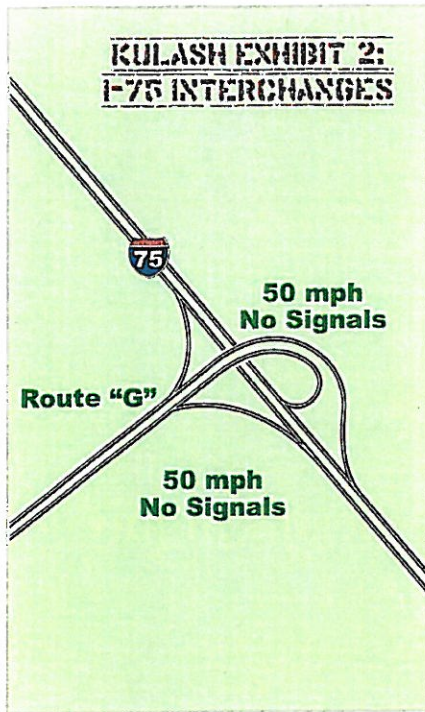


Opening
July 19th, 2010



313 Broad Street
Rome, Ga.

KULASH EXHIBIT 2: I-75 INTERCHANGES



“As an engineer, I believe this idea is preposterous. According to [the GDOT’s] own data, Route G gives better service from Rome to Atlanta.”

saying that DV-E, with regards to the first goal of the long distance trip, meets this goal but Route G doesn't. And with regard to the local traffic, [they propose that] DV-E would relieve from the existing route and that Route G would not.

“As an engineer, I believe this idea is preposterous. On both counts, the DOT is wrong. According to their own data, Route G gives better service from Rome to Atlanta.”

Kulash contends that Route G would usher motorists to Interstate 75 much faster and much more efficiently than would Route D-VE, satisfying the first goal of the 411 Connector. Faster to I-75, due purely to the shorter distance of Route G in comparison to the proposed D-VE, and more efficiently because of the design of the interchange with I-75.

It is the difference between the interchanges of the two routes that is staggering, and one that really highlights how much more efficient Route G seems than DV-E. (See graphic, top left). Kulash

notes, “Route D-VE attempts to combine the 411 Connector, SR 20 and I-75 into a single interchange. The result is an expensive, complicated interchange that requires all connecting traffic to reduce speed and travel through traffic signals.”

In his discussion of Route G, Kulash points out that its “interchange with I-75 is simple and dedicated solely to connecting the 411 Connector to I-75. No traffic signals or associated reduction in travel speed are necessary with Route G. Direct access, free of traffic signals, is provided for all movements between the 411 Connector and I-75.”

Is the city of Canton (or other points along SR-20 west of I-75) the intended destination for trips originating in Rome, perhaps justifying the need to create an interchange with the 411 Connector, SR-20 and I-75, as purported in the plans for Route D-VE? No, says Kulash. Driver surveys have shown that roughly only three percent of trips originating from Rome and traveling east along 411 have this goal

in mind. Surely not enough to create a complicated and expensive interchange at SR-20.

Since Route G appears to be a cheaper, faster and more efficient alternative to Route DV-E—not to mention one with less engineering obstacles—then why has it not been seriously considered a viable route for the 411 Connector? Is Route DV-E a more environmentally friendly option?

Quite the opposite, many contest, adding that it is Route DV-E's proposed path of environmental destruction that is aiding the rising tide of opposition to the GDOT's plan to have this route constructed.

The GDOT right-of-way for the proposed Route D-VE cuts right through not only Dobbins Mountain, but Pettit Creek and its expansive floodplains. Dobbins Mountain is a known refuge for deer, bald eagles, bobcat and other large species that are impacted by the area's rapid growth. The blasting of it, environmental proponents contend, will not only adversely affect the habitat of these animals, but will also spell the removal of acres of permeable surface area. This will render a negative impact on the hydrology and ecological makeup of the Pettit Creek watershed.

Pettit Creek is an ecologically vital tributary that lies within the Etowah River Basin, a basin that is home to a number of imperiled aquatic species, including three species of fish that are federally marked as endangered or threatened. The Cherokee Darter, one such fish, is endemic to the Etowah River Basin; it is found nowhere else on Earth. The Pettit Creek watershed is among three creek systems in the basin below Allatoona Lake that hosts the Cherokee Darter in its waters. This fish has proven to be very sensitive to disruptions within its watersheds in the past, and the construction of Route D-VE through the heart of the Pettit Creek watershed would likely prove no different.

Tony Greco, an aquatic biologist with McNutter & Associates in Athens, has done extensive ecological surveys of the Pettit Creek watershed. He fears that the 411 Connector could cause irreparable damage to both the hydrology of the watershed and its native species if the chosen route crosses this area. “The proposed 411 Connector will result in increased impervious surface area and projected land use change, from currently undeveloped to developed,” says Greco. “As a result, direct and cumulative

impacts will result in altered stream and wetland hydrology, increased sediment and chemical run-off, loss of aquatic and terrestrial habitats, and threats to federally protected species—namely, the Cherokee Darter.”

Route D-VE would increase the amount of impervious surface area within the watershed to 20 percent of the watershed’s entire acreage. At this percentage, populations of the Cherokee Darter decrease dramatically. It is a decline that has caught the attention of not only area biologists, but also the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

At present, Route D-EV is estimated to impact over 4,200 linear feet of streams, over 1,000

more feet than the GDOT mentioned in its original estimates regarding environmental impact.

Bartow County is rapidly losing its private forests and watersheds to

development, and is set to lose hundreds of acres more if the construction of Route D-VE is allowed to move forward. The Etowah River Basin ranks between the 85th and 95th percentile (nationally) in the number of at-risk species found in private forests. And, as Greco notes, “The Etowah River watershed ranks number four nationwide in the number of private forested acres to be developed, and, consequently, also ranks among the 90th percentile of combined at-risk species and development pressure.”

With the addition of the 411 Connector to the Pettit Creek watershed, as well as its potential destruction of Dobbins Mountain and its surrounding woodlands, Bartow County and the Etowah River watershed could stand to lose another pristine environment to what many would deem irresponsible development. In turn, the last few months have seen a growing concern among citizens of Floyd and Bartow counties, many of whom are ensuring that their voices be heard. “There’s a cheaper, more environmentally friendly way to build a road than to blast through Dobbins Mountain,” says Pierre Howard, president of the Georgia Conservancy, the state’s largest

environmental advocacy organization.

“The proposed route was a bad idea years ago, and it’s a bad idea now. It is unfair to taxpayers to build the most expensive route that also does the most environmental damage.”

On July 16, with the hopes of saving and preserving Rollins Mountain as a wildlife refuge, the city of Euharlee (located in southwest Bartow) took action, acquiring 100 acres of Dobbins Mountain then owned by Cartersville Ranch, LLC, by way of a conservation easement agreement. Under a traditional conservation easement agreement, the landholder cedes certain defined rights. These rights often include use of the property for commercial

trying construction period, provide a more efficient means to I-75, and have a much smaller environmental footprint. However, the battle over the right route is still heavily entrenched.

At deadline this June, only \$25 million is on hand to fund this project, all of which is federally earmarked for appropriation by U.S. Rep. Phil Gingrey (R) of the 11th District. The bulk of this would go to purchasing the right-of-way land from the Rollins family.

But what will happen if the \$25 million is used for the land and the rest of the money doesn’t arrive? In a state badly strapped for cash, will we be able to pony up the difference, some \$165 million?

“Obviously, there is a need for a connector... but there is no reason *not* to do it for half the cost. There is no reason *not* to do it with less environmental impact... We need to give the people in Floyd County a way to get to I-75, but we need to do it the right way.”

and industrial development, as well as subdividing the land for residential development. In return, the property owner may receive certain federal and state income tax incentives, as well as a reduction in property and estate taxes. Most importantly, though, and as is the case with the 100 acres ceded in the Euharlee-Cartersville Ranch agreement, this land is to be conserved as a wildlife refuge for generations to come.

This agreement may very well be enough to save Dobbins Mountain and its surrounding forests from the pending doom brought about by eminent domain, forcing the GDOT to examine other options. Under Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act of 1966, the 100 acres known as the “Refuge” in the easement agreement qualifies for federal protection as a “public park, recreation area, or wildlife and waterfowl area of national, state and local significance.” With this designation, the “Refuge” of Dobbins Mountain can only be acquired by the state through eminent domain if there are no feasible alternatives.

With Route G, the state has a more than feasible alternative, and one that will incur half the costs, undergo a shorter and less

When both the economical and environmental costs are considered, Route D-VE, the GDOT’s proposed route for the 411 Connector, is a questionable one. Other viable options for a 411 Connector remain, leaving citizens to wonder what are the GDOT’s incentives, what do they have planned “down the road”? Could this be a backdoor attempt at constructing the first leg in the widely despised Northern Arc proposal?

It’s indisputable that this route was once part of the budget for the Arc, and with its congested interchange at SR-20 as part of the design, Route D-VE would appear to be a great starting point if the Northern Arc proposal was ever to be revived.

“Obviously, there is a need for a connector...to get traffic off the surface streets,” says Chris Harrell when asked about Route D-VE. “It needs to be done, but there is no reason *not* to do it for half the cost. There is no reason *not* to do it with less environmental impact than what will effect the communities in Bartow County. We need to give the people in Floyd County a way to get to I-75, but we need to do it the right way.”