

PRIVATE PROPERTY VS. PUBLIC INTEREST

Family likely victors in Rome road battle

Governor says route through Rollins' land would be costly.

Georgia DOT will have the final say on project.

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The Rollins family did just about everything it could do to block a new road linking Interstate 75 to Rome and running just south of the family's vacation home and prized fishing lake.

And on Thursday the effort by the prominent Georgia clan – which was joined by environmentalists and other nearby residents – appeared to pay off.

Gov. Nathan Deal told Rome lawmakers that building the road through Rollins' land would be tremendously costly and that the state will explore alternatives. He also vented at the Rollins' monumental efforts, which he said were "employed to delay and ultimately divert the course of the project."

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PROPERTY DISPUTE

DOT and the Rollins family locked horns for decades over plans to build a road through thier property.



IN-DEPTH COVERAGE

The Georgia Department of Transportation and the Rollins family – owner of pest control businesses including Orkin – have fought for decades over plans to create a direct route to Rome from Interstate 75 that would cut through the family's 1,800-acre ranch. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution has brought readers insight and context into this extraordinary dispute.



Gov. Nathan Deal told Rome lawmakers Thursday that building the road from Interstate 75 to Rome through the Rollins' family land would be tremendously costly and that the state will explore alternatives. He also vented at the Rollins' monumental efforts, which he said were "employed to delay and ultimately divert the course of the project." JOHNNY CRAWFORD / JCRAWFORD@AJC.COM 2012

Family likely victorious in road battle

Rollins

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The final decision is up to the Georgia Department of Transportation, which said it is still evaluating options. But Deal's comments mean the direct route to I-75 that Rome and its 100,000 residents have long sought is mired in deeper uncertainty.

The land would probably already have a road running through it if it were owned by anybody else. But the Rollins clan, which controls a multibillion-dollar pest control business that includes Orkin, has waged one of the most aggressive road-blocking campaigns in state history.

The family hired lawyers, strategists, engineers and scientists who lobbied to prevent highway construction on the land. Biologists contended it would endanger rare birds and wildlife. Engineers harped on potential design flaws. Attorneys persuaded officials to turn a chunk of the property into a state-recognized wilderness. And preservationists convinced the federal government to declare a nearby mine as a historic landscape called Dobbins Mountain Mining Landscape.

The latter was a key development. Deal's letter came after the Federal Highway Administration concluded that any road built near the abandoned manganese mine, which dates to the 1860s, would have an "adverse effect" on the site and urged engineers to show whether there's a better alternative.

State planners and Rome leaders say an alternate route to the north wouldn't eliminate as much traffic. But Deal said the federal government's stance means that Georgia would either have to spend "a vast amount of energy, time and resources" to minimize the impact on the mine or choose another route to qualify for federal funds for the project.

"This is a change of position on the part of the federal government," Deal told reporters on Thursday. "It's going to cost us money and it's going to cost us time to try to find another alternative route."

The Rollins clan praised the government decision and the environmental groups and neighbors who also opposed

A TIMELINE OF THE DISPUTE

1970s-1980s: O. Wayne Rollins, the powerful business executive, puts together a more than 1,800-acre ranch in Bartow County. As he amasses the last parcels of land, Rome leaders lobby the state for a more direct route from Interstate 75.

Late 1980s: The state plans a route to Rome north of the Rollins estate but changes its plans after Anheuser-Busch said it would buy the property and build a brewery there. The new route cuts through Rollins' land, prompting a legal fight.

1993: A federal judge sided with the Rollins family and temporarily blocked the road from going forward.

Late 2000s: After more delays and another scuttled route, state planners once again plan to blaze a trail through a part of the Rollins land. Rollins responds by hiring attorneys, engineers, scientists and consultants to fend off the construction.

June 2013: The Federal Highway Administration finds that building the road could have an "adverse effect" on a nearby abandoned mine eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. Gov. Nathan Deal said the decision would require a "vast amount of energy, time and resources" to build the proposed road, and suggests exploring other routes.



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the route. It argued that another route a few miles to the north could save \$100 million because it is shorter and requires fewer bridges.

"Now it's time to work together on selecting an alternative route that will benefit the citizens of Bartow County and Floyd County so the road can be built as soon as possible," said Gary Rollins, chief executive of Rollins Inc., parent of Orkin and other businesses.

Motorists driving to Rome from I-75 now take a crowded 6-mile stretch of Ga. 20 before getting to a divided highway for the rest of the trip. That stretch adds 10 to 30 minutes to the 70-mile trip between Rome and Atlanta, backers of the new road say. Businesses leaders say the inconvenience has cost the northwest Georgia city jobs and investment.

"Just think about how many times these trucks have to gear up and gear down just to get to the highway. Each time that costs money," said Buzz Wachsteter, a Rome city councilman who is a retired retailer. "We've been fighting this fight for 30 years. I'll be dead and gone before they ever turn a spade of dirt. I'm going to be 69 next week and can't wait much longer."

The dispute dates back three decades, when O. Wayne Rollins, the late co-founder of Atlanta's Rollins Inc., pieced together the last of the more than 1,800 acres he assembled for his Bartow County ranch. At the urging of Rome's leaders,

Georgia officials also began exploring new ways to connect Rome to the highway.

The route they eventually settled on, called D-VE-A, would veer near the mine, through a patch of protected wilderness the family deeded to the small city of Euharlee, then dart below the estate's 100-acre lake before merging with the divided highway, U.S. 411.

Gary Rollins, Wayne's son, has long argued that an alternate route a few miles to the north is a better option for the road, which he has said would destroy wilderness and ruin his family's property. He said the family spent \$1 million to build the lake and other improvements only after it was assured that a new road wouldn't carve through the land.

Deal supported the route through Rollins' land during his 2010 campaign, and the Rollins family pumped more than \$38,000 into the campaign coffers of Karen Handel, his Republican rival. She said at the time their was no link between the contributions and her support of an alternative path.

It's not clear what route state engineers will settle on, but Deal said he's told the transportation department that finding a better road leading to Rome is a priority.

"My determination is we're going to have route to connect Rome back to the interstate — and we want to do it as quickly as possible," Deal said. "It's just regrettable the federal government now postponed the project even further."

AJC writer Kristina Torres contributed to this report.