



2019 PUBLIC INFORMATION OPEN HOUSE RESPONSE TO PUBLIC COMMENTS

Version 2

July 2020



Georgia DOT PI 0013914, DeKalb County



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In June 2019, the Georgia Department of Transportation (Georgia DOT) hosted five (5) Public Information Open House (PIOH) meetings to provide project information and to solicit public comment on the I-285 Eastside Express Lanes project. The attendees of the PIOHs and those persons submitting comments within the comment period raised a number of questions. In coordination with the State Road and Tollway Authority (SRTA), Georgia DOT has developed this summary of comments and responses to provide clarity on the project's features and process. Below, the project team has organized the comments into broad topics. In each section, themes of the public comments received are presented in italics followed by Georgia DOT's response to each comment. **This second version of the response letter (dated July 2020) provides updated information regarding the project's schedule and the Northlake Parkway access point. Georgia DOT will continue to monitor the project's development for key changes and information and will update this summary as the project concept evolves and more project details become available. Key updates to this version of the response letter can be identified by red text.**

Express Lanes Overview

What are the Georgia Express Lanes?

Georgia Express Lanes are optional priced lanes that complement the general purpose lanes along the interstates in some of the most congested corridors around metro Atlanta. These lanes provide a choice for drivers to bypass congestion when desired, offer a clear path for transit operators, and add an alternative to the general purpose lanes that exist today. The result will be a network of express lanes that provide more reliable and predictable trip times. All Georgia Express Lanes rely on a congestion-based toll pricing in order to provide reliable travel times especially during peak congestion.



Project Overview

Project Need and Purpose

Why is the express lanes project needed?

The project is needed to provide reliable trip times for drivers and transit users and to improve connectivity between regional destinations through priced, express lanes that are proposed to integrate with the larger metro Atlanta express lanes network.

Funding

Comments were submitted regarding funding for the project.

The I-285 Eastside Express Lanes project was made possible by the Georgia General Assembly's passage of the Transportation Funding Act (TFA) of 2015 and funding from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). Additionally, the project is anticipated to be delivered using a Public-Private Partnership (P3) contracting model, whereby Georgia DOT solicits bids from private investors/equity partners/Developers for the project. The successful bidder partners with Georgia DOT and secures financing for the design and construction of the project.

Project Process

Comments were received regarding inconsistent information between PIOH meetings.

All displays, video simulations, and informational boards presented at the PIOH meetings were the same at each meeting. Georgia DOT encourages anyone with remaining questions or conflicting information to contact the project team at eastsideexpresslanes@dot.ga.gov or (678) 247-2685. If you would like a Georgia DOT representative to speak to your organization, please submit a speaker request via the project website (<https://majormobilityga.com/projects/eastside/>).

Comments were received regarding additional time and input needed for decision making.

Since the I-285 Eastside Express Lanes were announced in early 2016 as part of the larger Major Mobility Investment Program (MMIP), Georgia DOT has coordinated with stakeholders and sought to inform the public about the project. Georgia DOT has held more than 200 presentations and meetings to educate and seek input from MMIP stakeholders and local citizens in the past two years. These include concept coordination meetings with elected officials and local government staff as well as numerous presentations and coordination meetings with city councils, homeowner's associations (HOA), and other civic organizations. Information on the project has been shared by both traditional and social media outlets. Georgia DOT has also undertaken activities to distribute and gather more information about the project, including:

- sent early coordination letters to federal, state, and local agencies;
- solicited feedback from organizations along the corridor;
- requested civic and religious organizations along the corridor share information with their contacts and distribution lists about the project and public meetings;
- posted information along the corridor; and
- published legal ads, mass mailed postcards, and posted road signs advertising the public meetings.

In addition, Georgia DOT hosted PIOHs along the corridor in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA); posted meeting materials online at both the project website (<https://majormobilityga.com/projects/eastside/>) and Georgia DOT's public outreach website (<https://dot.ga.gov/AboutGDOT/PublicOutreach>); and solicited comments via the project website, email, letter, and court reporter. The PIOHs attracted more than 450 attendees and generated over 230 public comments, in addition to the project team receiving numerous phone calls, letters, and emails. As the project is still in the concept design/environmental review phase, Georgia DOT will continue to coordinate with local governments on the project's preliminary engineering.

The project website will continue to be updated during the preliminary engineering process and a refined project concept will be presented at **the project's Public Hearing Open House (PHOH) meetings to be held in quarter 2 (Q2) 2021**. The design-build contractor, referred to as the Developer, would be responsible for completing the final design for the project.

Project Schedule

Through the development of the MMIP, Georgia DOT has considered industry feedback regarding the quantity and timing of major procurement packages. Additionally, maintenance of traffic and the amount of congestion during the construction of the major express lanes projects was going to be a challenge. To help mitigate these challenges, the schedule for the I-285 Eastside Express Lanes has shifted. Developer Selection was originally slated to take place in 2021, with construction beginning in 2023. Developer selection will now take place in 2023 and construction will follow in 2024. These schedule changes will not delay the scheduled opening of the I-285 Eastside Express Lanes, still scheduled to open to the public in 2028.

Shifting the project's schedule also provides Georgia DOT with an opportunity to continue discussions with our partners, such as DeKalb and Fulton Counties, the Top End Mayors, and the ATL about future transit and transportation endeavors to further enhance mobility in the region.

Though the project schedule for the I-285 Eastside Express Lanes has changed, Georgia DOT has identified a series of I-285 Advanced Improvement Projects (AIPs), which were already part of the MMIP. The AIPs will bring improvements sooner and help ease disruptive construction congestion. The I-285 Eastside Express Lanes project limits, programmed as an AIP, consists of three I-285 overpass bridges that need to be replaced to accommodate future I-285 Eastside Express Lanes. The three overpass bridges are: Covington Highway, Redwing Circle, and Glenwood Road. For additional information on the AIPs, please visit: <https://majormobilityga.com/advancedprojects/>.

	Before 2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028
Stakeholder Coordination		Stakeholder and Public Involvement 										
Project Planning												
Environmental Process (Pre-Let)												
Preliminary Engineering												
Right of Way												
Developer Selection							★					
Final Design												
Environmental Reevaluation Process & Permitting (Post-Let)												
Construction												

Access Points

Access Points – General

Several comments were received regarding the lengthy stretch of the project where no access to/from the express lanes is proposed (i.e. between Henderson Road and North Decatur Road).

Georgia DOT has recommended initial access point locations based on a series of factors that include:

- Traffic demand
- Functional classification of the access location
- Availability or potential for park and ride facilities
- Proximity to town centers or activity centers
- Spacing which allows access for capture of potential users
- Future land use capability
- Access location conditions (right-of-way, ease of implementation)

As the express lanes corridor is advanced through concept development and design, other criteria are being considered for access point locations, including safety, areas of congestion in the mainline, traffic operations, interchange spacing (general purpose vs. express lane access), right-of-way, and environmental constraints. Some of the access points currently proposed may evolve or be removed from consideration as design work advances. In addition, stakeholder outreach and public participation will also play a role in refining access location. As design continues to progress and additional traffic information becomes available, Georgia DOT will continue to evaluate the proposed access point locations.

Access Point – Tucker

Comments were received regarding access to the Tucker area from the proposed express lanes.

Georgia DOT has studied the feasibility of providing an express lane access point at Northlake Parkway, and has adopted north-facing express lane only ramps (half-diamond express lane interchange) as part of the project concept. This scenario would require the removal of the existing general purpose access at Northlake Parkway. Several factors have been considered prior to introducing an access point at Northlake Parkway including, but not limited to, the access point's impact to: operations of the Lavista Road interchange and the surrounding roadway network, environmental resources, private property, and project schedule. The final decision to move forward with the modification to this interchange will require FHWA approval.

Comments were received in favor of an access point at Northlake Parkway but opposed to the removal of the existing general purpose exit and entrance ramps.

It is Georgia DOT's general practice not to consider general purpose interchanges for arterial access ramps to express lanes. General purpose and express lanes interchanges remain as separate facilities to avoid potential operational impacts of combining both traffic types into a single location. Therefore, the construction of express lane direct access ramps to Northlake Parkway would necessitate the removal of the existing general purpose ramps.

Access Point – Stone Mountain Freeway

Comments were received regarding the need for access at the U.S. 78/Stone Mountain Freeway interchange.

It is Georgia DOT's general practice not to consider general purpose interchanges for arterial access ramps to express lanes. General purpose and express lanes interchanges remain as separate facilities to avoid potential operational impacts of combining both traffic types into a single location. Further, there is no planned or programmed express lane project along U.S. 78/Stone Mountain Freeway. As a result, Georgia DOT is not considering U.S. 78/Stone Mountain Freeway as a potential access point.

Access Point – Redan Road

Comments questioned the selection of Redan Road over existing exits at Covington Highway or Memorial Drive for express lane direct access.

A direct access ramp is proposed at Redan Road to provide express lane access to the Indian Creek MARTA station. Further, it is Georgia DOT's general practice not to consider general purpose interchanges for arterial access ramps to express lanes. General purpose and express lanes interchanges remain as separate facilities to avoid potential operational impacts of combining both traffic types into a single location.

Design

Several commenters expressed concern that one general purpose lane would be removed in each direction to provide the express lanes.

No existing general purpose lanes will be removed as part of the proposed project. The I-285 Eastside Express Lanes project would add one priced express lane in each direction generally between I-20 and Henderson Road by converting the existing inside general purpose lane to an express lane, converting the existing outside shoulder to a general purpose lane, and

constructing a new outside shoulder, thus maintaining the same number of general purpose lanes as today.

Several comments questioned the elevation of the express lanes at U.S. 78/Stone Mountain Freeway.

The express lanes are elevated over Stone Mountain Freeway due to the existing left-hand entrance ramps from Stone Mountain Freeway to I-285. These existing ramps preclude the option of leaving the express lanes at the same grade as the I-285 general purpose lanes in this area. To keep the express lanes at the same grade as the general purpose lanes would require the reconfiguration of the I-285 at Stone Mountain Freeway interchange, which would result in substantial property impacts to the neighborhoods located around the interchange. As currently proposed, all project-related construction in the area of Stone Mountain Freeway would remain within existing right-of-way.

Several commenters expressed concern regarding stormwater retention/detention, while others questioned the location of the proposed detention ponds and potential mosquitos near the ponds.

As more lanes are added to I-285 via the I-285 Eastside Express Lanes project, additional stormwater runoff will occur along the corridor. Detention ponds are essential to reducing the risk of flooding on neighboring properties. The roadway's drainage design will be brought to current standards, where possible, as part of the overall design process and conform to best management practices. The project corridor falls within a Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) permitted area which consists of a system of conveyances owned by the state or local municipalities that discharges to waters of the U.S. Therefore, this project is subject to the requirements of the MS4 Permit. The stipulations to comply with this permit will require treatment of the runoff and protection of area surface waters and water quality. To address drainage concerns, design features in this project include, but are not limited to: detention basins, curb inlets and pipes (e.g., a closed drainage system), and ditches along the corridor where feasible to convey stormwater away from the roadway.

The detention ponds are stormwater management systems that will be used to both remove some of the pollutants in the roadway runoff (improve water quality) during a storm as well as to prevent downstream flooding. They are not intended to be permanently wet but rather to detain the water and drain at or near the pre-widened roadway so as not to flood downstream. It is intended for these ponds to release all water within 48 hours of rain events and not to serve as permanently wet ponds. Stormwater retention ponds will include fencing to discourage unauthorized access to Georgia DOT right-of-way.

The detention pond locations shown at the PIOHs are preliminary and locations will be further refined as design progresses. The detention ponds are being designed by registered design professionals in accordance with Georgia DOT policies and standards. As part of the installation of these basins, routine maintenance will be conducted. Being dry between rain events greatly reduces the attractiveness to nuisance species.

Commenters requested direct access ramps to I-85 northbound and southbound.

While not proposed as part of the I-285 Eastside Express Lanes project, direct express lanes to I-85 High Occupancy Toll (HOT) lanes connections are proposed to be constructed as part of Georgia DOT PI 0001758, the I-285 Top End Express Lanes. More information on the I-285 Top End Express Lanes project can be found by visiting the project website at <https://majormobilityga.com/projects/topend/>.

Requests were made to include local complete streets concepts including pedestrian and cycling infrastructure along the project.

For the most part, bike, pedestrian, and complete streets facilities are not within the confines of the I-285 Eastside Express Lanes project scope. However, the proposed project would provide sidewalks along both sides of the roadway in locations where implementation of the proposed project necessitates the replacement of existing bridges over I-285. The sidewalks in these areas would be confined to the project limits. In addition, the proposed project would also accommodate the planned pedestrian trail along Northlake Parkway. Georgia DOT will coordinate with local governments to determine if they wish to provide funding to advance portions of the bike, pedestrian, and complete streets facilities into this project.

Emergency Response

Commenters questioned how accidents and stalls will be handled in the express lanes.

As currently proposed, the project would provide buffer separation between the express lane and general purpose lanes meaning double solid white striping in non-direct merge access areas and double skipped white striping in direct merge access areas. This would allow emergency responders and tow trucks to access and drivers to maneuver around any accidents or stalls that occur in the express lane.

Traffic

Several comments were received regarding impacts to the operations of Lavista Road and its entrance and exit ramps as well as overall increased traffic on local roads.

No changes in access at Lavista Road is proposed; the existing exit and entrance ramps to/from I-285 will remain in place. As part of the project, Georgia DOT is conducting traffic analysis studies and will be comparing No-Build and Build conditions for local roads, including Lavista Road, to identify the need for improvements directly related to the construction of the express lanes. Based on the analysis conducted to date, the proposed project would now include a westbound right-turn lane at the intersection of Lavista Road and Northlake Parkway as a result of the project.

Environmental Impacts

Air Quality

Concerns were raised about the project's contribution to air pollution.

Previous planning studies by the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) considered whether the I-285 Eastside Express Lanes project would affect regional air quality. The project was evaluated in the Region's Air Quality Conformity Analysis and was included in the financially-constrained six-year Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) for the region. The latest Air Quality Conformity Determination Report can be found at this link:

<http://documents.atlantaregional.com/transportation/tip19/am7/TARPCDR%20Am7.pdf>.

The proposed express lanes project is found in an amendment to the conformity report. All amendments require a conformity determination from the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT), in consultation with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). This amendment will involve a new air quality conformity determination by the USDOT and is expected in

quarter three (Q3) of 2020. The most recent regional emissions analysis was approved by FHWA and EPA on February 18, 2020. Additional background is found at this website:

<https://atlantaregional.org/transportation-mobility/transportation-planning/tip-amendment/>

An air quality analysis will be completed for this project as a part of the environmental process, evaluating the project's contribution to mobile source air toxics (MSAT) burdens and other National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS).

Noise/Noise Barriers

Are noise barriers part of the project?

Considerations for mitigating impacts from highway traffic generated noise, including noise barriers, are part of the planning, location, and design of the I-285 Eastside Express Lanes. It should be noted that existing and proposed noise barriers were not shown on the displays at the PIOHs as the noise study is ongoing. The project does not propose to remove or reduce the length of existing noise barriers, rather, it will evaluate all areas of the project, including those with existing noise walls, to ensure adequate abatement is received where feasible and reasonable.

How are noise barrier locations determined?

A Noise Impact Assessment will be conducted to determine the acoustic impact of the proposed project and the need for abatement measures on noise sensitive receivers (e.g., residences and public outdoor spaces, etc.). During the planning phase, the analysis will focus on identifying potentially impacted noise sensitive receivers. Final location of noise barriers will be determined during final design with the input of affected landowners and residents. Benefited landowners and residents will be invited to participate and vote on whether they would like to have the barrier constructed. Only at that point will a final decision be made. For the walls/barriers to be installed the vote will need to be over 50 percent in favor.

The determination of noise impacts and abatement measures will comply with Title 23, Code of Federal Regulation (CFR), Part 772, and the Georgia DOT's policies for highway noise barrier construction. More information regarding the Georgia DOT's noise barrier policy can be found in the Georgia DOT's Environmental Procedures Manual

<http://www.dot.ga.gov/PS/EnvironmentalProcedures/AirandNoise>

Additional information concerning the FHWA's guidelines is available at

https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/noise/regulations_and_guidance/index.cfm

When will noise barriers be built?

Noise barriers are built by the Developer, usually at the end of construction phase of the project. Noise barriers are built in-line with construction schedule, which is determined by the Developer. **The construction phase of this project is currently expected to start in 2024 and continue through 2028.**

A request was made to construct a berm in the northwest quadrant of the Stone Mountain Freeway interchange to aid in noise reduction.

To be effective, a barrier must block the "line of sight" between the highest point of a noise source and the highest part of a receiver. The higher the berm, the more land is required for its construction. Because of the amount of land required, a berm is not always the most practical

solution to highway noise. Additional considerations for placement of a berm within the interchange include safety and maintenance. Abatement measures will be evaluated for the project as part of the environmental process. Final location of noise barriers will be determined during final design with the input of affected landowners and residents.

Trees

Commenters requested information on how wooded areas will be maintained on Georgia DOT right-of-way.

The Georgia DOT right-of-way is maintained to facilitate sight distance, clear zone requirements, and safety considerations, which may require the removal of trees. Multiple activities could occur in this right-of-way as part of routine maintenance or during construction including staging areas, utility maintenance/relocation or other infrastructure needs.

Commenters requested that trees planted for beautification purposes within existing interchanges be maintained.

Implementation of the proposed project may result in the removal of existing landscaping and trees within interchanges. Landscaping is not performed by Georgia DOT and is usually implemented under a separate agreement and by permission from Georgia DOT with a local government or other stakeholder. If a landscaping plan and agreement is in place, replanting of these areas is typically performed at the completion of construction activities in the affected areas.

Commenters requested that trees be used for noise abatement.

Vegetation must be high enough, wide enough, and dense enough that it cannot be seen through to reduce noise, and typically vegetation provides more of a perception of noise reduction to the human ear. Therefore, it is not considered a noise abatement/reduction option by the FHWA.

Water Quality

Commenters questioned if water quality will be impacted by the project.

The proposed project would be designed to comply with current water quality standards. The project corridor falls within a MS4 permitted area which consists of a system of conveyances owned by the state or local municipality that discharges to waters of the U.S. Therefore this project is subject to the requirements of the MS4 Permit. The stipulations to comply with this permit will require treatment of the runoff and protection of area surface waters.

Right-of-Way

Homeowners expressed concerns that their property values would be negatively impacted by the project.

The final plans for the project are still under development. The conceptual drawings presented will continue to be refined with a focus on avoiding perceived negative impacts when possible. If avoidance is not possible, the Design Team will explore opportunities to minimize or mitigate these impacts while adhering to the scope limitations of the project.

Several comments questioned if the project would result in residential displacements.

As currently proposed, the I-285 Eastside Express Lanes project would not result in any residential, commercial, or institutional displacements.

School Impacts

Commenters requested adequate noise abatement for Henderson Middle School.

Noise barriers will be further evaluated as part of the design process.

Construction

Residents and commuters requested limitations on the times of construction to reduce travel and noise impacts.

Georgia DOT will review construction time periods and lane closures during the Request for Proposal (RFP) process that defines the scope of work for the Developer to follow.

Commenters requested information on construction schedules.

Detailed construction schedules outlining phasing are not currently available and will be designed after multiple rounds of public comment and in coordination with the Developer once the project is Let (awarded) in 2023. Please see page 3 for general schedule information.

Tolling

Commenters requested information regarding why the new lanes are being priced.

As a dynamically priced system, the Georgia Express Lanes are offered as a choice that complements the general purpose lanes along the interstates in some of the most congested corridors around metro Atlanta. These lanes provide a choice for drivers to bypass congestion when desired, offer a clear path for transit operators, and add an alternative to the general purpose lanes that exist today. The result will be a network of express lanes that provide more reliable and predictable trip times. All Georgia Express Lanes rely on a dynamically-priced toll in order to provide reliable travel times especially during peak congestion.

Commenters expressed concerns that the lanes would only benefit those who can afford the toll.

Motorists only pay if they choose to travel on the express lanes. Motorists will continue to have the option to use the existing general purpose lanes as a toll-free option. Rates on the express lanes will be dynamic which aids in managing the number of motorists that use the lanes while still meeting expectations for free-flowing travel to ensure reliable trip times.

In addition, transit vehicles traveling the express lanes will experience a more reliable trip time, improving the overall transit experience for the numerous riders who choose transit as a mobility option. The express lanes support the existing general purpose lanes by providing travel choices in mobility to make a behavioral decision based on the need of a reliable trip time.

Commenters requested that alternative fuel vehicles be allowed to use the express lanes for free.

State-registered transit vehicles, vanpools, emergency management services (EMS), and school buses are the only vehicles that can ride toll-exempt on the express lanes. State-

registered alternative fuel vehicles, motorcycles, and all carpools must pay the toll on the I-285 Eastside Express Lanes.

Transit

Commenters questioned why the project proposed to build more highway lanes rather than building more transit and requested that the project include bus rapid transit (BRT).

Transit expansion is a necessary part of an entire regional transportation system as are express lanes. Motorists need options for their trips based on how they travel. As Georgia creates a transportation system for the future, areas within the metro Atlanta region will experience growth differently. The I-285 Eastside Express Lanes will provide motorists and transit users more reliable trips in areas where rail expansion has not occurred. The I-285 Eastside Express Lanes project is being designed to accommodate future BRT stations and service identified in DeKalb County's recently adopted Transit Master Plan by providing the necessary bridge span lengths to accommodate future in-line BRT stations in areas where implementation of the proposed project requires replacement of existing bridges.

There is currently no programmed project or funding for heavy rail within this corridor. For more information on heavy rail transit, please contact MARTA.

Future Updates

To provide additional responses to public comments received, the project website will continue to be updated during the preliminary engineering process and a refined project concept will be presented at [the project's Public Hearing Open House \(PHOH\) meetings to be held in Q2 2021](#).