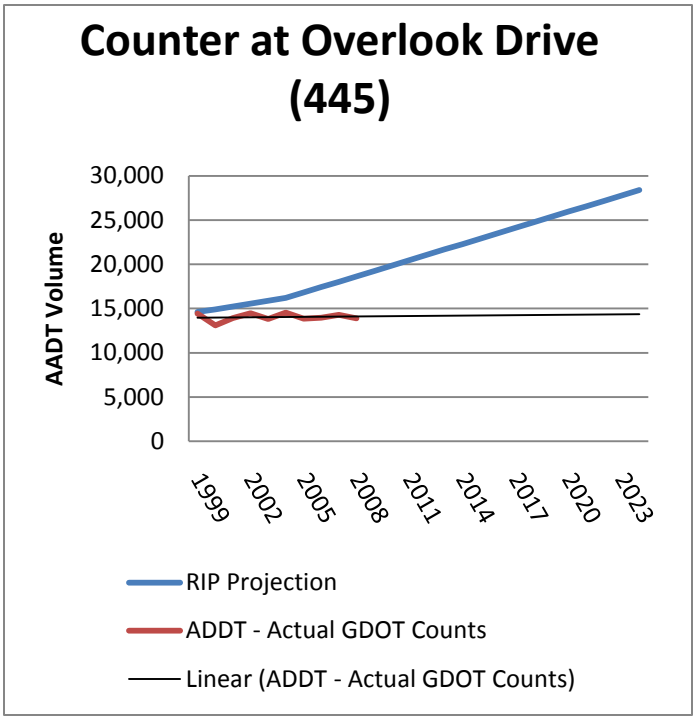
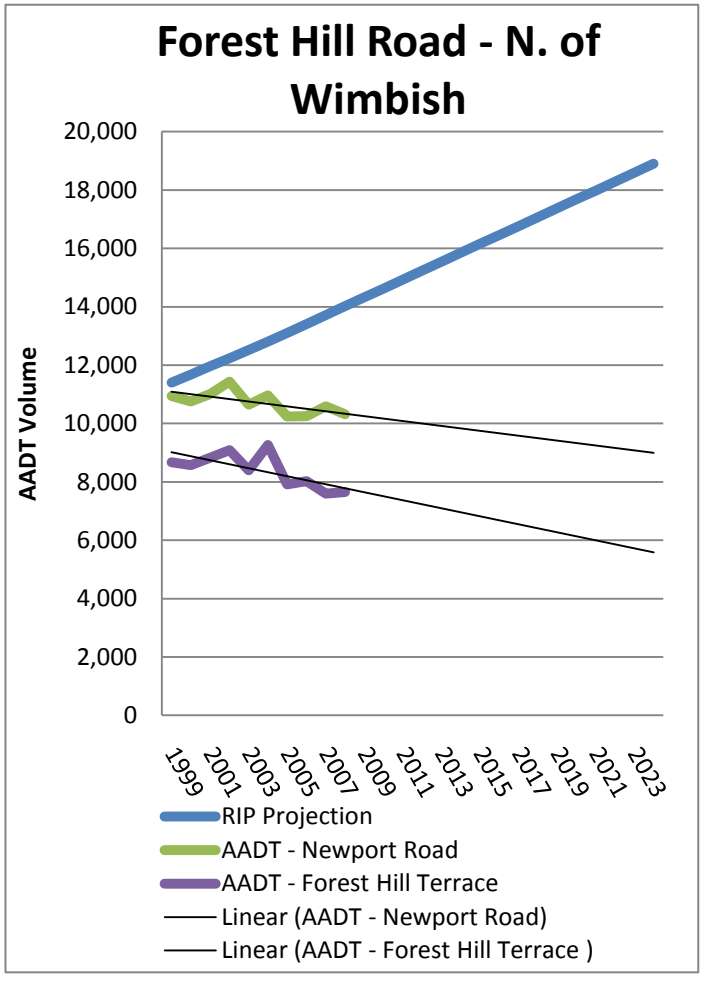


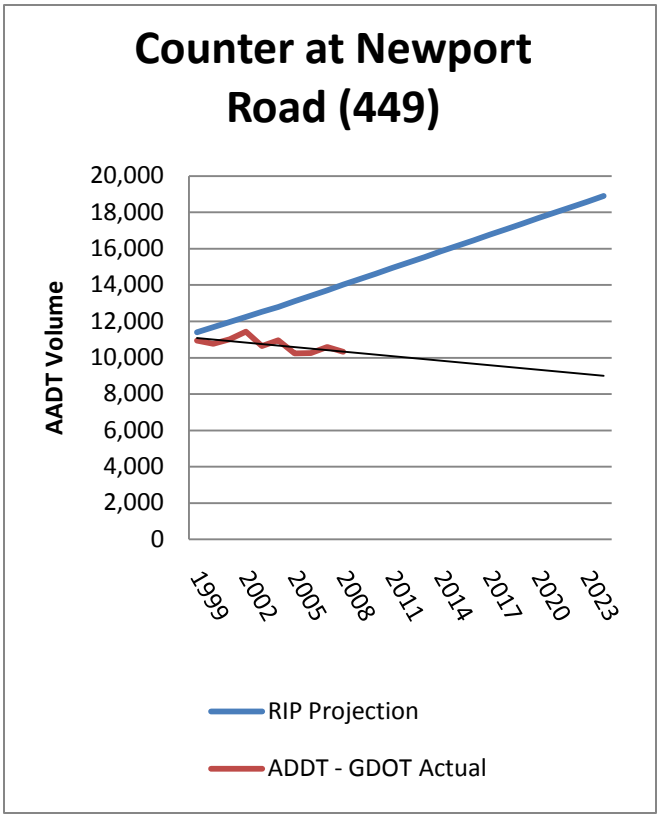
Forest Hill Rd - GaDOT Project No STP-3213(1) Macon-Bibb RIP Continues with a Flawed Needs/Purpose & Environmental Assessments

The *Purpose and Need* for Forest Hill Road's design is based on traffic volume projections and safety concerns. This has been the basis of the design from the first *Purpose and Need* written over a decade ago until the latest *Environmental Assessment (*EA*)*_revisions from 2007 and 2008. Unfortunately every EA for the project is based on erroneous traffic projections, erroneous data used to make the projections, and erroneous or inadequate accident data and analysis. In addition, solid available data (clearly the best data available) which contradicts conclusions in the EA has been ignored. There are no explanations why contradictory information, GDOT traffic volumes for instance, should be ignored and the projections in the EA should be regarded as the best scientific assessment of the design needs for the project. Common sense demands these explanations especially since the delay in the project has given us the opportunity to clearly see the original projections are erroneous by a great margin, as the historical traffic volumes indicated they would be . . . and continue to do so.

TRAFFIC VOLUMES—The original EA based huge projections on traffic volumes the road program gathered on the road in 1999. There is no evidence or mention of historical GDOT traffic volumes or that there was any attempt to annualize the volumes collected by the road program in 1999 so these numbers could relate to GDOT data. It is also highly questionable science/procedure to project traffic volumes for the year 2023 using data collected from only one year, especially when historical records of traffic volumes for the road exist. There are no explanations offered why this data is being ignored. There is no evidence that any EA projection has been modified by a proper annualizing formula in order to make these numbers relate better to GDOT AADT.

The blue line in the first three charts reveal the traffic volume projections from the original EA (RIP—Road Improvement Program) in the areas where they can be compared to actual AADT traffic

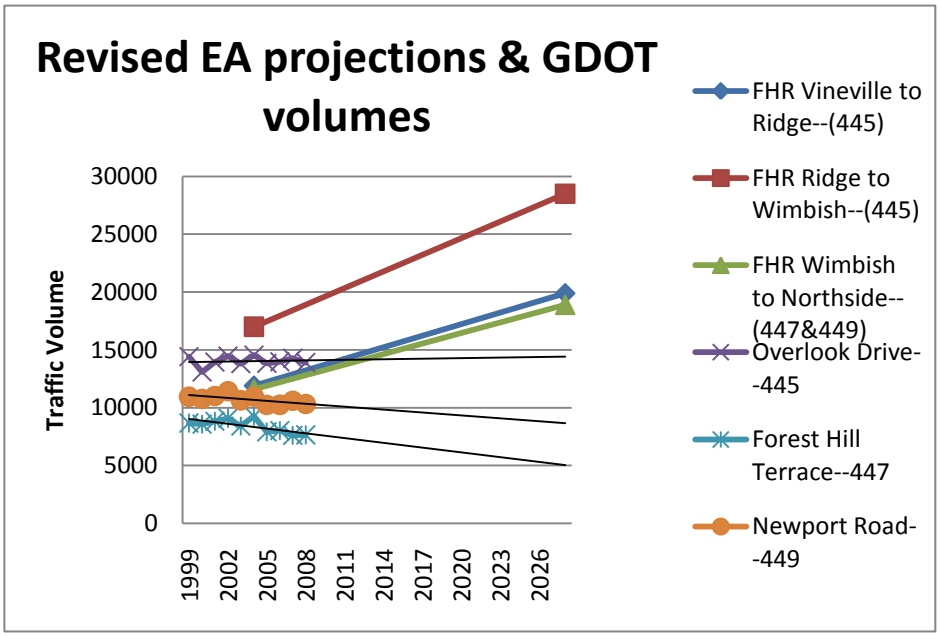




volumes collected by GDOT. A computer program uses a black trend line to chart the projected volume for 2023—the same year the EA makes projections of traffic volumes based on the documented GDOT AADT traffic volumes for the last decade. Compare to the projections made in the EA based on one year's data—1999.

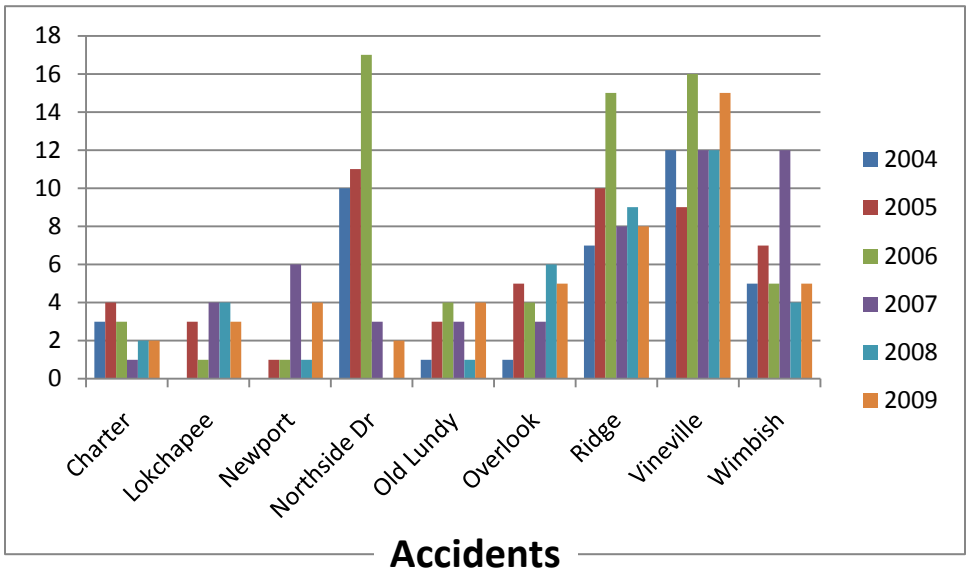
One quickly sees the traffic volumes based on the historical data never get higher than 14,900 by 2023 based on GDOTS last ten years of data at the busiest portion of the road. At the other two counters the past decade's data indicate a volume trending downward, well beneath 10,000 vehicles per day by 2023, leaving serious questions about a design which includes four lanes through a residential neighborhood. Due to delays in the project, the delay in the project allowed the EA projections for 2004 to be compared to GDOT's traffic count.

All the charts show how seriously the EA over projected the 2004 volumes for the road. In a revised EA during 2007-8 it was discovered that the MATS 2030 model predicted a lower volume than the volumes predicted by the MATS 2025 model. Undeterred by the MATS model and GDOT volume history both predicting lower traffic volumes for Forest Hill Road, MATS staff blamed "unusually high residential vacancy rates" and claimed that GDOT historical data indicates a growth rate for the road of 2%. The next chart shows the revised projections and compares them to the last ten years of GDOT volume data with black trend lines (linear) projected into 2028. The three lines indicating a sharp increase in traffic volume (solid red, green and blue lines) are the traffic volume projections plotted from the data within the EA. They are based on only two points—a volume for 2004, which differs from GDOT's volumes, and the projected point in 2028. It would appear that once again the EA is basing a projection many years hence on one year's historical data. The EA does not reveal any other data used to justify their projection of huge traffic volume coming to the road. And, once again, we can see the trend lines from the last decade's road volume data completely contradict the new projections in the EA. (The EA made projections for sections of the project rather than at in-



tersections as does GDOT. The numbers 445, 447, and 449 in parentheses reveal which of the GDOT counters are within the section where the EA makes a projection.)

While the volumes are trending significantly downward, even if the volumes remains the same or should begin to rise at a modest rate, for some unknown reason, a design containing four lanes remains unjustified and threatens serious harm to the neighborhood. It is neither an efficient nor an effective use of tax money.



Accidents

The chart above shows the number of accidents at the intersections experiencing the greatest number of accidents since 2004.

The stats provided us do not include accidents in the county portion of the road for 2007 to 2009. However, since the Northside Dr. intersection was rebuilt a few years and the city line is fairly close to the this end of the project these accidents would add little significance to the graph.

Vineville Road represents one end of the project; it will certainly be improved now or as part of the Vineville Road project. It is unclear if these accident stats are included in the EA accident data.

Charter, Overlook, Ridge, Wimbish and Vineville, along with several other intersection s would be addressed by the three-lane proposal for this stretch of the project. This clearly addresses the most serious of the intersections.

It is rare to find any other block or intersection which experienced more than 2 accidents per year during this time-period.

SAFETY—In the original EA Forest Hill Road was described as having an accident rate 10% higher than the statewide average; the design was to address this safety issue. After examining these statistics we challenged this finding. In a letter to us from GDOT's Mr. Harvey Keepler, he admitted the accident figures were in error and, in fact, the road experienced an accident rate 20% lower than the statewide average. Mr. Keepler explained that accidents statistics from outside the project area had improperly been added to the project totals. He also promised the EA would be revised to reflect the new accident data. Instead of acknowledging a 20% safer accident rate, or that the original EA accident analysis was in error, the revised EA cited data from 2004 to 2006 to argue once again the accident rate is significantly higher than the state wide average. The EA does not show enough of their formulas or basis for determining state wide average or how they calculated Forest Hill Road's relationship to the statewide average; this makes further review of this statistic impossible. However, we were able to do a review of the accident data sufficient to show the continuing inadequacy and incompetency of their accident analysis.

The EA does not show how or whether they have improved their process of including accidents only within the project area. But even if you accept the accident totals used by the EA for the three years they studied—2004, 2005 and 2006—statistics show, and have shown for a decade, that the vast majority of the accidents occur at 4-5 intersections, thus if these intersections alone were addressed, the remainder of the project could be spared expensive and neighborhood-damaging road construction. In every year we examined,

accidents would be reduced by a minimum of 50% (some years a lot more) by simply addressing these same accident prone intersections; the rear end statistics, cited in the EA as problematic, were improved by similar percentages as well. If one uses the plan offered by renowned engineers Walter Kulash and Rick Chellman, who have examined this road, a third turn lane is added to the southern stretch of the road from Wimbish Road to Forsyth Road. This not only addresses the dangerous intersections, but adds a turning lane to every intersection in this section, ensuring safety statistics for the road will be *greatly* improved. *Residents and the public enthusiastically support this plan.* In addition, though the northern section of the road is generally much safer, if the design for the road would add improvements to a couple intersections where such improvement seems to make sense (such as Old Lundy Road which diagonally intersects with Forest Hill Road) accident statistics could again improve even more, *and residents would embrace such a common sense approach to "improving" the road*. The other alternatives offered from these nationally recognized engineers, who agree the project is over built, have yet to be addressed by the road program or the EA.

LOGICAL TERMINI—"Federal regulations [23 CFR 771.111(f)] require that projects connect logical termini and be of sufficient length to address environmental matters on a broad scope; have independent utility, that is, be usable and be a reasonable expenditure even if no additional improvements are made in the area." (http://www.dot.state.ga.us/doingbusiness/PoliciesManuals/roads/DesignPolicy/GDOT-DPM-Chap13.pdf) The EA claims nearly 34,000 cars per day will be using Forest Hill Road at the Vineville intersection by the year 2028. There is a long range desire to improve Vineville but nothing is in the works to date and no designs have been presented. Currently, Vineville Avenue has three lanes with the center lane utilizing lights that reverse the lane at various times during the day. The road has many historic homes lining both sides of the road with sections of the road which are commercial. The no-build projected volume for FHR is 16,400, the presumed current capacity for the road. Bringing as many as 34,000 cars to the Vineville intersection-- where all traffic studies show the vast majority of vehicles will turn left onto Vineville-- will have a devastating effect on the road and intersection, if Vineville is not improved as well. Improving FHR at this time at the very least will limit future options for improving Vineville unless designs for FHR are made in conjunction with improvement designs for Vineville as well. Improper construction on FHR could necessitate the destruction of historic properties on Vineville at a later date. Claiming Vineville Avenue as the terminus for the FHR constitutes segmentation and is creating a situation the federal regulation is seeking to prevent, if one accepts the traffic projections in the EA as accurate. Segmenting is nothing new to this program. The local daily newspaper has accused the program of constant segmentation with little system-wide planning. A median was planned for a project on Pio Nono Ave. intended to make the road safer from all the additional traffic the Fall Line Freeway would bring to the road. A GDOT executive came to meet with residents and store owners who opposed the design. He was asked how he could justify the project when no one knows which of seven site proposals will be selected for construction. The GDOT official responded "You have a point." The project was placed on hold a week later; the policy committee approved another site to study offered by the mayor last week. This site is nowhere near Pio Nono. Citizen protest may well have saved the state hundreds of thousands of dollars misspent due to feeble planning and segmentation.

In summary, GDOT road volume history does not justify the additional lanes within the current design, and any safety issues would be better addressed by designs which are also a lot less expensive. We also have serious credibility issues with the road program in Bibb County. We have the experience with the Houston Road project where a five-lane design was approved over neighborhood protests because of projected traffic volumes of 30,000 vehicles cars per day. After this project started construction, this projection was amended to 9,500 vehicles per day. The Wesleyan Drive project was abandoned when traffic volume projections could not be subs-

tantiated. Accident rates on Forest Hill Road go from 10% higher than the state wide average to 20% lower, and then back up again. Because of the construction delays we have seen the initial traffic projections for Forest Hill Road are in serious error and the best data available—GDOT's annual AADT—clearly indicate the EA projections for 2028 continue to be wildly overstated. I personally saw government trucks collecting CAUTION—Macon signs protesting the design for including a median on Pio Nona Avenue. This is not a good response to public input, nor has there been any credibility established when this road program or MATS offers statistics. In a recent newspaper article Don Tussing (from MATS)was quoted as explaining that EA projections for Forest Hill Road were not met because drivers were seeking alternate routes because the road is at capacity. GDOT road volumes clearly show his statement is not true and the picture he is trying to paint of the road is completely inaccurate. The road volumes have not only never reached what the EA says is the capacity, they have decreased. Tussing has a history of changing the reasons for the designs when we show his reason to be invalid, but he never recommends changing the design. We have heard a plethora of different explanations from Mr. Tussing about where traffic volumes are coming from and where they are going on Forest Hill Road.

We were told, by the road program, a Walmart Super Store was coming to the northern end of Forest Hill Road necessitating the current design. The store never materialized and Walmart said there was never any such plan. The projects in the road program do not have any established credibility or reputation with which they can ask anyone to trust their analyses. The little-used two left turn lanes from Northside Drive on to Forest Hill Road stand as a monument to the road program's propensity to over build everything, without regard to the effects their designs have on neighborhoods. The public and even our political leaders have been told on numerous occasions that if the project is not built as designed we could lose the state and federal money, yet Radney Simpson of GDOT wrote us "In the event that a transportation project identified in the current fiscal year of the Macon MPO's TIP is unable to utilize Fed/State funds, GDOT can elect to reallocate the Fed/State funds to a project in Congressional District 8 that is able to utilize Fed/State funds in the current fiscal year."

When we present GDOT's volumes for the last decade to the MPO, Jim Thomas told us that the proper analysis of the road volumes for projecting future volumes is to look at volumes 20to 30 years ago and that the last decade's drop in volumes is due to a bad economy (never mind that the declines in the economy only began less than three years ago.) Yet GDOT's **POLICIES AND PROCEDURE 4050** states "the traditional traffic forecasting method relies greatly on historical trends. Historical counts for the past fifteen years should be used if available. The counts should be smoothed to eliminate any bad counts and to show the general trend. Using the least squares method (Excel program), calculate base year and design year volumes based on the last fifteen, ten, and five years, giving the most weight to the ten year trend."

The project needs some serious review. The traffic volume projections and accident rates need explanations and substantiation. Other alternatives to address concerns should be properly considered. The logical termini are not logical—the project independent of Vineville Avenue. To date this project has proceeded by virtue of political power and stubbornness rather than solid science and sharp engineering. Please be certain that the science, engineering and use of statistics properly address the needs of the road and this community. GDOT and FHWA reputations are integral to the decisions on Forest Hill Road. Consider the latest editorial in the Macon Telegraph, below.

January 14, 1010

The Macon Telegraph

http://www.macon.com/203/story/984506.html

Time to rethink (again) Forest Hill Road project

It's the road project that has as many lives as a cat. From the Road Improvement Program's very onset, more than a decade ago, Forest Hill Road has been the center of controversy. It was the road responsible for the formation of CAUTION Macon. It was the stretch of road, from Northside Drive to Vineville Avenue that was supposed to be part of a project to connect the north side of town to the Macon Mall. It was the road that brought renowned road engineer Walter Kulash to town only to see him drummed out by a trumped up charge that he was practicing in Georgia without a license. This road controversy has outlasted two mayors (it's working on its third), two county commission chairman (it's working on its third) and several iterations of its plan. The constant elements have been the state Department of Transportation, Moreland Altobelli (the company managing the Roads Improvement Project for the county) and CAUTION Macon.

Last month it was made public that property acquisition would restart along Forest Hill and that the project would get funding from the DOT by 2014. City and county representatives have come out in support of the project. Unfortunately, they should see the big, fat stop signs, sitting at the intersections along the route.

According to the DOT's fabricated traffic counts, the road would be eligible for upgrades. However, the last 10 years of actual data show that with simple improvements to the intersections, the road will have the capacity to handle expected traffic. In fact, actual traffic counts show the volume of vehicles decreasing. By now, according to DOT projections, the road was to have almost 20,000 cars and trucks cruise the Forest Hill route south of Wimbush. However, it's accommodating less than 15,000 vehicles.

There are several possible reasons for the decline in traffic, but the basic cause is an ill-fated concept. Instead of looking at our roads holistically, the roads program segmented its projects. Instead of having a complete system, its been piecemealed. For example: What good would it do to expand capacity on Forest Hill Road if there were no plans to tackle Vineville Avenue? How much more traffic does Northside Drive now handle after improvements?

It's time for city and county leaders to tell Moreland Altobelli and the DOT, to go back to the drawing board and come up with a plan that makes sense for an neighborhood, not a throughway to a commercial strip.

— Charles E. Richardson, for the Editorial Board.

http://www.macon.com/local/story/993156.html

Thursday, Jan. 21, 2010

Forest Hill debate finds no answers

By MIKE STUCKA - mstucka@macon.com

Efforts to find a common solution for Forest Hill Road's traffic problems splintered again Wednesday.

Lindsay Holliday, one of the road's biggest advocates, said local transportation planning officials poked no holes in proposals by New Hampshire traffic engineer Rick Chellman that call for slower speed limits on the road that may carry fewer cars. However, some traffic planners in a 30-person meeting of a Macon Area Traffic Study committee Wednesday criticized the plan and said it provided no solutions.

Don Tussing with the Macon-Bibb County Planning and Zoning Commission said Forest Hill Road traffic hasn't increased, according to projections, only because weary drivers shifted to other roads."That section of road is at capacity, Tussing told Holliday in Wednesdays meeting. "You can,t squeeze more through there."

City, county and state plans call for a stretch of Forest Hill Road near Vineville Avenue to become a four-lane road with a grassy median. Closer to Northside Drive, the road would carry two lanes of traffic and a middle turning lane.

Holliday argued for one less lane in each stretch. Portions of his road would have a six-foot-wide path on each side that could be used for bicyclists, and the speed on the entire road would drop to 35 mph instead of 45 mph, he said.

Sometimes you'll just pick a slower road because it's quieter and calmer, he said. "We would choose a lower level of service."

Tuesday, transportation consultant Van Etheridge told county commissioners the proposed four-lane section carried 14,900 cars a day and the three-lane section carried 11,000 cars in a 2007 study of actual traffic.

If you looked at those numbers right there and started designing the road today, you'd design the same road, he said. In response, County Chief Administrative Officer Steve Layson said that even if traffic dropped 3,000 cars, that size road would still be needed.

Holliday said Wednesday that the Chellman plan could be easily implemented, with little extra planning costs that would save millions on construction. He argued a left-turn lane could have already been add-

ed at Ridge Avenue. They want you to solve the congestion at that intersection, and by God, we could do that today, he said.

Officials at Wednesday's meeting said planning, including environmental studies, would have to be started over and would add years to the timeline.

Holliday said in a later telephone interview that a solution for Forest Hill Road could be necessary to the county passing a special purpose local option sales tax. He said residents are correct in supporting the Chellman plan and are prepared to sue the county.

If we can't get this technical fix, if they don't fix Forest Hill Road before they try to sell this next SPLOST, it's going to get very embarrassing for them, Holliday said. "There are solutions out there."

County Commission Chairman Sam Hart said he doesn't know a timeline for the project now but knows the state has begun buying more right-of-way for a road widening.

A state worksheet showed the road is on a 2014 transportation plan, but a state official said that was a mistake and Forest Hill Road is slated to open by 2020.

To contact writer Mike Stucka, call 744-4251.