

Bridge improvements will better connect Midtown

by Randy Johnson

Last month work crews closed down all but one lane on Williams Street between 10th and 16th giving Midtown drivers an advance preview of just how tangled traffic may become. In fact, the delays and frantic searching for alternative routes will likely kick into high gear when work begins in earnest on one of the biggest road projects to hit this area since the original construction of Interstate 75 decades ago.

Work is already under way on an \$86 million project to replace the 14th Street Bridge with a new six-lane, more pedestrian-friendly structure. The bridge will feature a 13-foot median with wide sidewalks on each side as well as landscaped medians, both on and off the bridge, with flowers and trees to create a more protected pedestrian environment.

In addition to Williams Street, all lanes of Techwood between 10th and 16th streets will be closed in March. Ramps from the Downtown Connector to 10th and 14th will also be shut down. Finally, sometime in the fall of 2008, the bridge itself will be torn down and work will begin on the new span, which is scheduled for completion in May 2010.

Thousands of people who commute to Midtown each day will likely be faced with significant delays -- perhaps double or triple the usual time. They will be forced to detour around closed streets into alternates that may be clogged with traffic, according to the Midtown Alliance.

"Now our real focus is mitigating the impacts," said Dan Hourigan, director of Midtown Transportation Solutions. "We're taking a proactive approach to that, working with employers and property managers and individual commuters in a number of different ways."

Adding to the commute problems, the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) will also be repaving sections of the Downtown Connector during the summer.

The main thrust is to get employers to help workers take alternative means of transportation -- from public transit to walking -- or even avoid Midtown altogether by teleworking. The alliance is urging businesses to increase employee use of alternative transportation by 10 percent.

"We obviously need to do what we can to get as many cars off the road as we can or to get them scheduled in ways that will minimize the congestion," said Ben Johnson, managing partner of Alston & Bird LLP, a major Midtown law firm, who is leading a campaign to boost alternative commute options.

"It's not going to be much different than it was during the Olympics back in 1996. We are going to be very challenged and we are going to have to play with a lot of different solutions to try to reduce the number of cars that are on the road, particularly during peak hours."

The Midtown Alliance plans to survey the 30 largest employers in the area to determine how many employees are taking alternative transit.

"This will give us some baseline data so we know where they are today and where they need to get their 10 percent," said Hourigan. "So really in the initial stages we've gotten good feedback from some of our member companies about they may start to offer transit subsidies where they've just offered payroll deduction before."

By offering additional incentives -- or starting new programs -- the Alliance hopes a significant number of employees will make the shift away from individual cars to public transit, car and van pools, and other means of transportation. Some companies have already begun programs such as offering low-cost parking spaces for carpoolers or even setting up showers and changing rooms for bike riders.

State officials contend the project is vital to promoting growth in Midtown by creating corridors that can handle increased traffic.

"We needed to provide an adequate transportation system with the growth of the area," said Harold Linnenkohl, commissioner of GDOT. "We needed to do something with the growth of pedestrian activities and the [traffic] congestion."

Although officials admit the area is in for some pain, boosters say it will be worth it. The new bridge will form an inviting gateway to the Midtown area, according to Susan Mendheim, president and CEO of the Midtown Alliance.