

# NORTHWEST ARKANSAS Democrat Gazette

## **New highways, central Arkansas toll lanes to be studied**

### **Conway-Cabot, toll ideas in mix**

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The Arkansas Highway Commission authorized two studies Wednesday that will explore the feasibility of adding three new stretches of highway between Conway and Cabot and an interstate toll lane in four central Arkansas counties.

The commission voted to allow the Arkansas Highway and Transportation Department to conduct the studies in conjunction with Metroplan, the area's long-range transportation planning agency.

The commission agreed to study the impact of increasing the reach of Arkansas 89 to include a route from Cabot, through Mayflower and into west Conway based on a request from the Arkansas 89 Corridor Coalition, which consists of six Arkansas mayors, two county judges, the Metroplan director and seven state lawmakers.

This addition would serve as an alternative to the Northbelt Freeway that would have been a connector route across north Pulaski County, through Camp Robinson. The Northbelt Freeway has been removed from state plans because its cost is too high, according to the coalition's letter to highway commissioners requesting the study.

The study will cost about \$300,000, said Danny Straessle, spokesman for the Highway Department.

It will look into adding three highway segments to create a continuous Arkansas 89 corridor through Lonoke, Pulaski and Faulkner counties. The first will close the gap between Arkansas 107 and the Faulkner County line to create a more direct route for traffic heading west, according to the minute orders presented to commissioners at Wednesday's meeting.

The second will seek to relieve traffic pressure on the Arkansas 321 interchange in south Cabot by creating a new interchange in Jacksonville that connects the west end of Republican Road and Arkansas 89 at the Faulkner County line, according to the minute orders.

The final proposed addition that the department will study is to lengthen Arkansas 89 near Conway Municipal Airport to connect to Arkansas 60.

This would allow easier access to Interstate 40 for residents of west and south Conway, according to the minute orders.

Cabot Mayor Bill Cypert, a member of the corridor coalition, said the extension especially would help people who live in north Lonoke County, which includes Cabot, and commute to Little Rock or North Little Rock for work or for medical care.

The project under study would provide a more direct route to the state capital and cut down on travel time on a congested Interstate 30, Cypert said.

"That's the major advantage," he said.

The coalition's letter also states that its members do not think that it is feasible to find another route through Camp Robinson in North Little Rock because of "the enhanced need for security after 9/11."

The toll-lane study will follow an ongoing Highway Department analysis started in 2015 that looked into ways to alleviate traffic congestion on I-30 between Benton and its interchange with Interstate 440 and Interstate 530 in south Little Rock. While high-occupancy-toll lanes were included as an option in the previous study, this study would center on the use of toll lanes across Pulaski, Faulkner, Saline and Lonoke counties in central Arkansas.

Metroplan Executive Director Jim McKenzie proposed using one additional lane that would charge a toll during the two-hour peak times in the mornings and afternoons.

It would be a general-use lane the rest of the time. Also, he mentioned in a March 22 letter to Highway Department Director Scott Bennett, the "eventual consideration" of turning the toll lanes into automated-vehicle-only lanes.

Automated vehicles are defined as having at least one safety-critical control function -- such as braking, steering or acceleration -- that does not require direct input from the driver, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Electronic monitors spaced every quarter-mile or half-mile in urban areas would keep track of the vehicles using the toll road during peak traffic times. The toll revenue would pay for the road's improvements, Bennett said.

The monitors would be close together to prevent drivers from weaving in and out of the toll lane to avoid having to pay, he said.

Houston, Dallas and portions of California have implemented high-occupancy toll lanes in recent years.

They are a branch-off of high-occupancy-vehicle lanes intended to reduce traffic congestion by encouraging carpooling, according to a 2014 Cato Institute study.

The Arkansas study will begin in mid-2017 and determine if the addition of the lane and monitors would be viable, Straessle said.

"You have to have the traffic," Bennett said of the toll road possibility. "The traffic is what generates the revenue to cover the cost."