

Officials prepare for I-85, I-385 widening

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COLUMBIA - Although officials have yet to figure out how to pay for it, the state plans to widen Interstate 85 from Greenville to Spartanburg and to continue the widening of I-385 to Simpsonville, state transportation officials have confirmed.

The State Department of Transportation plans to spend \$13 million over the next two years to design both projects and to find a way to pay for them.

"I think I-85 is definitely one of the major thoroughfares that needs to be addressed in the state," said Tee Hooper, a DOT board member from Greenville and former chairman of the commission. "I think it is a new day in terms of how to try and finance projects like that."

Under conventional means, the two widening projects would cost more than \$400 million, money the state doesn't have. So officials have been looking at the possibility of high-occupancy or toll lanes, something officials are considering for widening projects around the state, said Ron Patton, director of planning for DOT.

Widening I-85 to eight lanes actually was proposed 10 years ago, Patton said, but the state didn't have the money then.

The project now is considered one of the top priorities in the state's new system of ranking projects because it would help alleviate congestion.

Plans call for the I-85 widening to stretch from U.S. 25, Whitehorse Road, to S.C. 129 in Spartanburg and for I-385 to be widened to six lanes from West Georgia Road in Simpsonville to the recently-completed widening near the I-85 interchange.

The I-85 widening would involve restructuring several interchanges along the way, including the I-85 and I-385 interchange, a massive project that by itself could cost \$90 million, he said.

By traditional means, the widening would cost about \$20 million per mile, Patton said. At 18 miles for I-85 and with the I-385 interchange work, that could total more than \$400 million. The I-385 work has been estimated to cost more than \$112 million, according to DOT's website.

"There's no construction funding identified yet, but the hope is that with the work on the design we will determine what the actual solution is going to be," Patton said.

Patton said the state only has \$100 million annually to spend for all its interstate work, including resurfacing, interchange construction, widening and other improvements. Among the state's more immediate interstate plans are widening portions of I-26 and I-526 near Charleston and widening I-20 near Columbia. The state is still searching for a way to pay for its expected match on the \$2 billion proposed I-73 project.

"I think there has to be some creativity and some understanding by the public that it's not going to be like it has been in the past, where there was plenty of money," Hooper said. "There is definitely huge needs just on the interstates. There are a lot of significant issues and \$100 million unfortunately doesn't solve a lot of those problems. There's going to have to be some creative methods and creative financing as to how to get it done."

A high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lane would require drivers to have at least one passenger. High-occupancy toll lanes (HOT) would allow drivers to use the lane if they pay a toll, even if they drive alone. Those with passengers, however, could use the lane for free. Such lanes are designed to remove more vehicles from interstate and reduce congestion.

Hooper said such lanes will be "foreign to South Carolina." He said their success, if officials choose to use them, will depend on how good a job they do at convincing drivers that such lanes work and have worked in other cities that have used them.

DOT has been surveying the public this year on the idea of using such lanes to relieve congestion on I-26 near Charleston.