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Transportation planners look ahead 25 years

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DALTON — Whitfield County's latest 25-year transportation plan looks a bit like the one local planners produced five years ago.

Members of the Greater Dalton Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) say that's to be expected. The area's transportation needs are well known, they say, and big items take years to complete.

The MPO unveiled a draft of the plan at a public meeting earlier this week. They plan to have one more public meeting some time in May before delivering a final plan to state and federal transportation officials on June 30.

Some of the top priorities of the previous long-range plan were redesigns of the I-75 interchanges at Rocky Face and Carbondale Road and the intersection of the Cleveland Highway and the North Dalton Bypass. Those are some of the top priorities in the latest plan draft as well.

MPO Transportation Planner Zach Montgomery said all of those projects are on state or federal roads and are slowly making their way through the state or federal transportation process.

He said, for instance, that the state is slated to begin acquiring right of way later this year and start its final design of the Rocky Face interchange project in May. The schedule calls for actual work on the project to begin in 2013.

For the redesign and reconstruction of the Carbondale interchange, Montgomery said the state plans to start buying right of way in 2011 and to start construction in 2015.

Because transportation projects take so long to complete, many of the projects in the MPO's road improvement plan are listed in the short-term (one to five years) recommendations, the mid-range (six to 10 years) and long-range (11 to 25 years) recommendations.

"They are phased because these are such large expenditures, and nobody has any money," he said.

All told, the projected costs of the road improvement plan call for more than \$400 million in state, federal and local spending over 25 years.

The MPO (then known as the Dalton-Whitfield Metropolitan Planning Organization) was formed almost 10 years ago. After the 2000 census, the federal government declared Dalton and Whitfield County to be a urban area. That meant that in the future they would have to have an MPO and a 25-

year plan to qualify for any state or federal transportation funds.

Montgomery says the process may seem like a lot of red tape but it's actually good for a community because it makes sure that a unified local voice is heard in state and federal transportation decisions.

The MPO has an annual budget of about \$180,000. The federal government picks up 80 percent of that costs, and the state and local governments pay 10 percent each. The MPO's policy committee is made up of elected officials from Dalton, Whitfield County, Varnell and Tunnel Hill or their representatives. The Whitfield County public works department provides the staff.

The 25-year transportation plan will not only cover roads. It will also look at the area's needs for rail, bicycle and walking trails and any needed changes at the Dalton Municipal Airport.

The plan calls for additional bicycle lanes and "share the road" signs in the northern part of the county, which is already a popular area for biking, as well as new bicycle lanes in the city of Dalton along Waugh Street, Emery Street and other areas.

To view the Greater Dalton Metropolitan Planning Organization's draft 25-year plan, go to www.whitfieldcountyga.com/engineer/mpo.htm.