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State needs leadership to deal with congestion
Editorial Opinion

Metro Atlanta residents in the past haven't had to look to their lieutenant governor to provide leadership on transportation issues. But that's what may soon happen by default if Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle steps up as promised to tackle an issue that has been mostly ignored by Gov. Sonny Perdue. We're talking, of course, about traffic congestion.

Candidate Perdue - even though he hailed from speck-on-the-map Bonaire in rural Georgia - talked a good game on congestion issues the first time he ran for governor in 2002. But it turns out that's about all he wanted to do on the subject: talk. He has provided little leadership on the issue since moving into the Governor's Mansion, even as congestion in the metro area has grown worse and worse.

Metro Atlanta's traffic congestion ranks an unenviable fourth-worst in the country, according to a recent study by the Texas Transportation Institute reported by "Forbes" magazine. And U.S. News and World Report recently predicted that metro Atlanta would boast the nation's worst traffic by 2030.

Meanwhile, Georgia has done little to tackle the problem. Gov. Roy Barnes pushed hard for rapid rail lines into the suburbs, for express buses and for a Northern Arc connector to reroute truck traffic between Interstates 75 and 85, but was turned out of office before he could make those plans a reality. Later, there was a proposal in 2005 for a \$1.8 billion public-private partnership that would build Bus Rapid Transit lines, truck-only lanes and additional HOV lanes in the I-75 and I-575 corridors. But a frustrated Cobb Commission Chairman Sam Olens, who chairs the Atlanta Regional Commission - and who has shown far more leadership on metro transportation issues than the governor - said earlier this month that the estimated cost of the project has soared past the \$4 billion mark and is nearing the cost-prohibitive stage.

Olens and other local-level leaders around the area have done their utmost, but there is only so much they can accomplish without a show of interest from the governor's office or top officials.

Proposals were floated during the recent legislative session for the creation of a statewide Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax for transportation, and for regional SPLOSTS to deal with multi-county transportation issues. They were backed by the Cobb Chamber of Commerce but they would be very tough to sell to voters, on top of the existing fuel tax, state sales tax and the many existing local SPLOSTS. And besides, even if two or three counties were to pass a regional SPLOST, that would be a poor substitute for the kind of comprehensive, metro-wide approach that is needed.

Moreover, leaders would have a better chance of persuading voters of the need for such a new tax if they were to come up with a plan ahead of time for how it would be used. In other words, don't put the cart before the horse. Voters would be quick to shoot down a proposal from officials who argued, "Vote for this new SPLOST and then we'll figure out what we're going to spend it on."

The unhappy reality is that nothing of consequence is going to happen regarding metro congestion unless those at the very highest levels of state government get directly involved and agree on a plan. And getting directly involved in anything seems to run counter to Perdue's nature. Plus, now that he's a lame duck, Perdue likely will be even less inclined to get involved.

So it was refreshing last week to hear Lt. Gov. Cagle tell the MDJ editorial board that he plans to come up with a comprehensive transportation plan for the metro area and state by next year's legislative session.

The well-meaning Atlanta Regional Commission and Georgia Regional Transportation Authority have studied our transportation problems ad nauseum, but with elusive results. Yet we don't need more studies and we don't need to be trying to figure out how to pay for the work ahead - not yet, anyway. What we need first of all is a plan. Then we can worry about funding it and rallying support for it.

You'll recall that the U.S. space program was stalled on the launch pad until new President John F. Kennedy pledged to put a man on the moon by the end of that decade. We did, and a huge reason we were able to was because the president threw the power and prestige of his office behind the effort.

What Georgia badly needs are top-rank officials who are unafraid to use their power and prestige in what arguably is the most pressing issue facing Georgia: transportation. Any plan - be it light rail, HOV, BRT, tunnels, a new truck bypass, double-decking the interstates or any combination of the above - will be controversial and expensive. But Casey Cagle is highly respected in the Senate as a consensus-builder and likely would try to reach out to the various "constituencies" and get advice from Olens and other metro leaders while coming up with a transportation plan.

So we commend Cagle for promising to take on this daunting task. If he wants to fill the leadership vacuum on this issue and climb behind the wheel of the bulldozer, that's fine by us.