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Tunnel beneath Sepulveda Pass or widen 405 Freeway? It could happen quicker with private money

By Christina Villacorte, Staff Writer
Posted: 12/26/2012 08:06:28 PM PST
Updated: 12/26/2012 08:10:12 PM PST

Lacking the billions of dollars needed to build the Sepulveda Pass Corridor, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority is considering partnering with the private sector to ease the flow of traffic in one of the most congested stretches of highway in the country.

A public-private partnership could result in the project being built several decades earlier than expected -- but drivers who use it may end up having to pay a toll.

The Sepulveda Pass Corridor is intended to add another connection between the San Fernando Valley and the Westside. For now, Metro has not decided whether to merely add lanes on the 405 Freeway for a rapid bus transit system, or build a nearly 60-foot diameter tunnel beneath the Sepulveda Pass that could fit a highway, a railway, or both.

Metro's chief for real property and new business development, Roger Moliere, said the difference in cost between adding a rapid bus transit system and a rail transit system is "vast" but said the latter would be more effective in reducing the congestion in that area.

"If you look at the Sepulveda Pass, there's no room to expand it because you've got mountains on each side," he said. "You might be able to build another lane -- maybe -- but that may not help much because this is the most congested highway segment in the country."

"Something like 300,000 vehicles a day go through that 10-mile stretch," he added. "At peak periods, it takes more than an hour

to get that 10 miles."

Under current funding scenarios, Metro expects to have \$1 billion for the project by 2039, with the money coming from Measure R, a half-percent sales tax that voters approved in 2008.

The cost of a tunnel, however, is about \$10 billion.

Moliere said if Metro decides to partner with the private sector, it would create financing for construction to begin in just a few years, instead of a few decades.

"At the very least, this would accelerate the project by 30 years," he said. "At the most, it actually creates the project, ... because there's really no funding set aside for this now except \$1 billion, which is very little for a project this size."

Moliere added there are only about four to six private entities worldwide that are capable of taking

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on a project this size, and all of them have reached out to Metro.

Investors would get their money back either by waiting for more public funds to come in, or by charging drivers a toll for using the highway within the tunnel.

County Supervisor and Metro board chairman Michael Antonovich has embraced the concept of public-private partnerships for infrastructure.

"Public/private partnerships for all of our transportation infrastructure projects can leverage limited tax dollars

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Bart Reed, executive director of The Transit Coalition, a nonprofit that advocates for improved transportation, said a public-private partnership might be the only way to avoid having to wait more than 25 years for relief in the Sepulveda Pass.

"If we don't do anything, basically, we're stuck with a freeway that can't be widened any further, and we're essentially relegating the Valley to gridlock for decades," he said.

Reed said he himself would be willing to pay the toll, as he has found himself stuck in traffic for three hours on the Sepulveda Pass while driving from Sylmar to LAX.

Molieri estimated the toll would be small because so many drivers would share in the cost in such a high-traffic area.

"It would probably be very comparable to the tolls that are on the 91 Freeway in Orange County, for example," he said. "And it would be completely voluntary, of course, because people don't have to drive on the tunnel -- they could stay on the 405."

"The tunnel would be an alternative for people if it was important to them to get through a heck of a lot faster," he added.

The toll on the 91 Freeway is as little as \$1.35 during nonpeak hours, but as much as \$9.55 at 3 p.m. on a Friday -- making it one of the most expensive in the state.

But in Orange County -- which has had toll roads for more than a decade -- some of the paid expressways have been plagued with financial problems, including heavy debt loads and lower revenue than expected. The San Joaquin Hills and Foothill-Eastern corridors, for example, are facing a new inquiry from the state over whether they can cover interest payments to investors who financed the projects with bonds.

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This would not be as necessary if Jerry Brown, in his first term as governor, had not disbanded the California Highway Commission, which we can credit for having planned and built the freeways that we currently use.

One of the freeways that was planned at that time was the La Cienega freeway, which would have gone up La Cienega and over Laurel Canyon to the valley. This would have taken a lot of pressure off the 405. Just one of a number of freeways which never got built because of Jerry Brown's "less is more" philosophy after he was elected in 1974.

So we got diamond lanes instead of more freeways and have suffered accordingly.
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