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Midstate key to rail system

If Georgia is going to continue to develop economically, it's going to need a better developed rail system.

And a key part of that system will have to come through the midstate, to connect the seaport of Savannah with Atlanta, home to the world's busiest airport.

That was the conclusion of a study conducted by the Brookings Institute and commissioned by Georgians for Passenger Rail, an advocacy group whose goal is to develop a passenger train system in the state. The study cost the group \$180,000.

Gordon Kenna, executive director for Georgians for Passenger Rail, presented the study's findings to a small group Tuesday afternoon at Terminal Station, which would serve as the hub for such a rail system. Kenna said the group hopes construction for a new passenger rail service could begin in 2016.

"If we work smartly and aggressively, it's something that's achievable," he said.

The plan calls for proposed stations to be set up in Macon, Forsyth, Griffin, Hampton, Morrow, Hapeville and Atlanta. Kenna said the total length of track — consisting of current tracks as well as improvements made to those tracks — would be about 103 miles. Six passenger train sets would need to be purchased, Kenna said.

The total cost for all of this would be about \$400 million, the study stated, with operation and maintenance costs running at about \$25 million annually.

Kenna said the study was commissioned and conducted before Georgia House Bill 277, which provides funding for transportation projects. Kenna said the bill, which is awaiting Gov. Sonny Perdue's signature, would help raise some of the capital for the rail project.

Other money would have to come from the state, the federal government and from Georgia cities and counties that would be affected by the rail service. Kenna said there are a variety of funding methods to be explored, including tax allocation districts, millage increases and other funding mechanisms.

He said Georgia missed out on \$9 billion in federal funds that were distributed to other states in the stimulus package for railways, because the state didn't have a plan in place.

The rail service, which the group hopes will be operating by 2018, would include two round trips in the morning and two in the afternoon during peak hours between Macon and Atlanta.

Mike Ford, president and CEO of NewTown Macon, is a member of Georgians for Passenger Rail's board. He said a passenger rail service would be a significant boon to Macon.

"What's important is that Atlanta is growing, and those people are going to be coming here," Ford said. "This will be critical to the future development of downtown Macon."