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Truth clear; Lovejoy line must roll

The mystery has been solved: The state Legislature never intended to kill or further delay a commuter rail line between Atlanta and Lovejoy.

That revelation means the increasingly desperate — and sometimes dishonest — public officials opposing the project have nowhere left to hide. It's time to get on with the project.

Last month, state Rep. Ben Harbin (R-Evans), who chairs the House Appropriations Committee, slipped a paragraph into the state budget in the waning hours of the Legislature barring use of state funds for "any commuter rail passenger facilities unless otherwise especially appropriated."

Opponents of the Lovejoy line, including state transportation board Chairman David Doss, immediately seized on that language as an unequivocal sign of the "Legislature's intent" that the Lovejoy line be halted.

In an interview with The Atlanta Journal-Constitution last week, board Vice Chairman Mike Evans agreed with Doss. "My opinion, based on what I know today, is that until we get some direction from the General Assembly on this, [the Lovejoy line is] essentially on hold."

But in an Equal Time column on Tuesday's @issue pages, Harbin directly contradicted the

claim that the Legislature had tried to halt the Lovejoy line.

"The truth, however, is simple," Harbin wrote. "Initial funding approved for commuter rail lines will continue to be available for approved projects."

The truth is that the state share of funding for the Lovejoy project already had been approved by the Legislature on at least two previous occasions, making it exempt from Harbin's amendment. The truth is that \$87 million in federal funding earmarked for the project is sitting idle while communities that have embraced the line are kept waiting. The truth is that the state attorney general's office has issued an informal ruling echoing Harbin's statement that the paragraph in question doesn't apply to the Lovejoy line.

Evans, Doss and others who oppose the Lovejoy line have every right to make their case. But they cannot continue hiding behind the Legislature's petticoats, citing some false legislative intent to usurp the will of their transportation board colleagues, a majority of whom voted last September to proceed with the project.

— Lyle V. Harris, for the editorial board

► **EQUAL TIME:** For another perspective on this issue, see the next page, **A15**