

Southern bypass route unveiled

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Back patting and applause were the order of the day Friday when members of the Southern Evacuation Lifeline's task force, S.C. Department of Transportation officials and Horry and Georgetown county leaders got together to sign a draft environmental impact statement and release a preferred route for the southern bypass, which will run from the South Strand to U.S. 501 at the S.C. 22 interchange.

The 28-mile road's preferred route begins at U.S. 17, less than one mile south of Holmestown Road. It jumps the Waccamaw River below the Bucksport Wildlife Management Area and about two miles above the Sandy Island Wildlife Management Area.

It winds through bucolic areas south of Conway, almost touches the Marion County line at one point, continues less than one mile from Lucas Bay Road before heading north crossing Gilbert Road, Beverly Road and then Cates Bay Road near the Dongola Highway, heads west over U.S. 378 about 2.5 miles west of the Conway airport, crosses Juniper Bay Road and hits U.S. 501 at its intersection with S.C. 22.

Plans are for a multilane, controlled-access highway.

Debbie Harwell, public involvement coordinator with SELL, says the road should be ready in about eight or nine years, at the same time that she expects I-73 to connect with S.C. 22.

People who travel SELL will be able to pass over U.S. 501, connect with S.C. 22 and quickly hit I-73 for hurricane evacuation, she said.

Everyone who attended Friday's signing ceremony was not ecstatic about the new road.

Nancy Cave, Northcoast office director with the Coastal Conservation League and also a member of the SELL task force, said the CCL opposes the road, not necessarily because of its environmental impact.

"This \$600 million road will open up thousands and thousands of acres in Horry and Georgetown counties to developers," she said. "This is about development, not evacuation."

Cave points out that Horry hasn't had a mandated evacuation since 1999 when Hurricane Floyd was bearing down on the coast.

Three hundred and sixty-five days a year the road will be bringing more traffic into the area and won't deal with the problems of existing roads, she said.

She says officials should focus on improving U.S. 501, which she calls a mess, and U.S. 17.

Officials should also look at other options to protect people from storms. She wants better shelters and a new laser technique that shows exactly how far people need to go to get out of harm's way.

She says the area has already erred in allowing people to build in flood zones. Their answer is to build roads that will allow people to put more homes in areas that should not be developed.

"It's this vicious cycle and we keep on the treadmill, and we're not willing to break out of it," she said.

Longtime Conwayite Mary Ruth Baxter has followed every action taken on the southern bypass because one of the 28 possible routes passed within several miles of her family home at Keysfield, threatening to destroy the tranquility of the U.S. 701 South area.

She is relieved to see the preferred route farther away from her home, but still isn't a supporter of SELL.

She says other needed road improvements should be given priority over SELL. She would prefer to see improvements to U.S. 501 and the completion of four lanes for U.S. 378 to Columbia where motorists can link to I-77.

Baxter said the new road will get her and her husband to the south end of the beach quicker than they can go now, but that one convenience needs to be weighed against the huge financial cost of the road.

Program manager Mike Barbee says hurricane evacuation isn't the only reason the area needs the road.

He believes the road will relieve congestion on overburdened roads, specifically U.S. 501 and S.C. 544, and will give residents improved access to needed services.

Horry County Council Chairwoman Liz Gilland also expects the road to help workers who travel from Marion and Williamsburg counties everyday to work along the Grand Strand.

She pointed to Horry County Councilman James Frazier of Bucksport as one beneficiary of the road, saying the road will allow him to zip to a South Strand hospital instead of traveling 45 minutes to get to the nearest hospital.

Highway commissioner Danny Isaac told the group that the population of the South Strand is going to double in the next 20 years. That will be permanent population, not tourists, he said, stressing the need for SELL.

However, Isaac said, funding the road is going to be difficult with gas tax revenues headed down. Also, he pointed out South Carolina's plight saying, nationally 19 percent of all public roads are state-owned. In South Carolina, that number is 62 percent.

Federal Highway Administration environmental coordinator Shane Belcher said the draft environmental impact study is just another step toward actually putting the road on the ground. There are many more steps that need to be taken, not just coming up with the money.

He also said tweaks in the road's alignment might occur in the final environmental impact study.

Horry County Councilman Howard Barnard of Surfside Beach chaired the task force. He says it was an easy decision for him considering that a majority of the people in his district (District 5) that he quizzed when he ran for office said the number one issue for them was roads and hurricane evacuation.