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Column:PROPOSED PATHS

AYNOR RESIDENTS CITE PROS
FARMERS SEE CONS
Tonya Root The Sun News

AYNOR

Excitement, apprehension and confusion cross Mark Squires' face as he talks about Interstate 73 and its proposed routes around this sleepy town. The second-generation farmer already has seen how a major highway can change the landscape. Farmland rented by Squires' family was split when S.C. 22 was constructed; now I-73 threatens land owned by his family for generations.

On a recent summer day, debate about the interstate filled the humid air as Squires and his family worked on farm equipment near a field of their corn.

``It's going to help in a way, but it will hurt us in a way that's probably worse if it splits our farm," said Squires, whose family farms about 1,000 acres of corn, tobacco, wheat and beans along Secondary Highway 129. ``It will mess us up and take all our farmland because we've got land on both sides. What comes, comes. There's nothing we can do about it, but I'd hate for them to mess the farm up."

Nearly all of the Squires' land lies in at least one shaded line that represents a half-mile wide proposed route on the I-73 map. Transportation officials are gathering feedback on those lines to chart the final 400-foot-wide corridor that will be presented in December.

Squires is among thousands of residents awaiting word on where the road will cross Horry, Marion and Dillon counties on its way to a connection with S.C. 22. Eventually, the road is proposed to run from Myrtle Beach to Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., and give the Grand Strand its first interstate connection.

Highway officials spent hours earlier this year listening to concerns from those residents and are tallying up those comments and the environmental-effect report before releasing which route the road will take.

For Squires, the route along Highway 129 then to S.C. 319 into Cool Spring would mean the end of a tight-knit historic farming community.

“The road will probably be good to some people, but not us [farmers],” Squires said. “It will take people awhile to learn how to drive out of here and change their life.”

Either proposed route around downtown Aynor - Highway 129 to S.C. 319 or southwest of U.S. 501 - will cut through farms, woodland and swamps. Today, fields filled with tobacco, corn, soybeans and hay nestled among pastures where horses and cows graze are common sights along the one- and two-lane roads.

Upscale new brick homes perch on acres of woodland and grassy hills, their nearest neighbors acres away in decades-old farmhouses. The loudest noises are the sounds of the birds competing with the rustle of the wind through the trees.

Security and a relaxed way of life reminiscent of earlier times are amenities for residents living along these roads.

“I would love the growth, but I don't want it so close to my house that I would hear it,” said Angela Johnson, who lives off Roberts Road where the shaded line of a proposed route runs south of U.S. 501. “If it would go through the area, I hope it will take my land. I always thought we were far enough away that it would never impact us because you don't want to think about what it could do until they make a decision, and you know it's coming.”

Johnson and her husband chose to build their home in the area after moving from Greenville a year ago. She says they feel safe enough to allow their son and pets to play in the countryside away from major highways and the congestion such a road brings.

Just a mile or so from Johnson off Jordanville Road lives Gerald Barfield, who is looking forward to I-73.

“I'll be glad to see it come, on account of traffic on [U.S.] 501,” Barfield said. “We need something to relieve traffic on 501.”

Easing congestion along U.S. 501 would be a benefit some residents welcome. The road will send most of that traffic to S.C. 22.

On summer days when tourist season is in full swing and visitors are pouring into the Grand Strand, travel on U.S. 501 between Conway and Aynor can come to a standstill, making life unbearable for residents who must get to work and school.

“It's going to congest [S.C.] 22 because right now it's an unknown road, but it's going to open [U.S.] 501 up and that's going to be great,” said Danny Rabon, who lives on Popular Church Road near S.C. 22. His family has land in one of the shaded proposed route areas near U.S. 501.

“I'm just a simple little house owner down the road, but I think it's going to be great. I don't see why anyone would oppose it. They pay good enough money they can come

right through my yard," Rabon said. "You can't go to Conway from Aynor on the weekend unless you know the back roads."

Those back roads are home to Crystal Corns, who lives on S.C. 319. Her parents live off Highway 129, but travel is not as much of a concern for the native as economic growth.

"Aynor needs more jobs, and it would bring more people to build the town up and grow," Corns said. "There's plenty of space out here so I don't think it will make a big difference, and it will be a great investment."

Many people in her community have mixed emotions about the highway because it could consume their homes, she said.

"I have a feeling it's going to bother a lot of people," Corns said. "And I can understand it if you are right in the road and it's going to take your house, but if it's only part of your yard, let it go."

Lamar Johnson, who owns Lamar's Meat Market and 21 adjacent acres of land where his business and home sit doesn't mind losing his land along Jordanville Road as long as he's compensated for the loss.

"I think it's coming whether they want it to or not," Johnson said. "I'd rather it come through here than Cool Spring because that's farm country. The thing of it is I'm not going to make a difference where it goes."

Johnson's family came to the area before the Revolutionary War and are a part of the area's history, he said.

"I can remember when there wasn't any roads; I'm glad there are roads now," Johnson said. "Aynor is going to grow with a road or without a road. Everywhere in Horry County is growing," he said.

"As long as they don't isolate me to where people can't get to me," Johnson said. "Isolation is the only thing that worries me."

Across the county line in Marion County, Marty Sawyer is praying the proposed shaded map route that now runs over his house and 9 acres of land is the path highway officials will chose when they come that way.

"I want them to go right through my house; I'm all for I-73 to go through Mullins not [U.S.] 501," said Sawyer, who owns an auction and antique mall off U.S. 501 Business outside Marion in another proposed route.

"I think it will upset a lot of people around here because they're not used to change like they are down along the coast," Sawyer said. "It can't hurt anything in this county"

because it's either got to stay the same or improve. It's got to help, I don't see how it could hurt."

E.C. Shepherd, who owns property in downtown Marion, agreed with Sawyer.

"We'd be glad to get I-73 because maybe it will bring some industry to us," Shepherd said. "It would really benefit Marion, and I think the majority of the people want it. We really need something to boost the economy around here."

Up the road at the corner where U.S. 501 Business and S.C. 38 intersects just outside of Latta, resident Edna McClam isn't happy with another road proposal coming close to her property. She already lost nearly 2 acres to the widening of S.C. 38 and said she can't lose any more land to a highway.

"I hate it. I think they done us wrong," McClam said. "They've closed up two plants here, so I don't know how it's going to bring more jobs."

No matter which side of the road residents are on, all see advantages and disadvantages to the new highway.

"It will help us in ways and hurt us in ways," Squires said.

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Illustration: Photos by Joaquin Siopack/The Sun News and one map titled: Where in South Carolina?

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