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CITY HUNGRY FOR INTERSTATE BOOST

Zane Wilson The Sun News

HAMLET, N.C. This old railroad-junction town appears about to become a crossroad of another kind: Interstates 73 and 74, and residents seem eager for it to happen.

Hamlet once thrived as a center of railroad activity, but much of that has died out and the town has suffered. New industries want interstates, not railroads, said Thomas McDuffie Sr. of Rockingham.

The S.C. Department of Transportation hosted a public meeting Monday evening on I-73 and its likely connection to I-74 just east of Hamlet.

Hamlet is about four miles north of the S.C. border.

I-73 is planned to connect Myrtle Beach and Sault Ste. Marie, Mich. Myrtle Beach is the largest tourism destination without an interstate connection, and people all along its 60-mile path in South Carolina see the road as a much-desired economic boost.

The road, especially because it intersects with I-74, will help bring new industry to Hamlet and nearby Rockingham, both in Richmond County, N.C., McDuffie said.

"I greatly appreciate our state improving highways," he said. "Sacrificing land is a small price to pay."

McDuffie doesn't think he will be in the path of the road, but his son, Carl McDuffie, is and will have to move off the land that has been in the family for more than 70 years. Thomas McDuffie grew up there but has since moved away.

Carl McDuffie said his house is in the path of the I-73 link near Ellerbe, a town west of Rockingham. He doesn't like having to move but said the highway is needed.

Danny Bennett of Hamlet said he would like to see I-73 built so he could get to the beach quicker. The retired firefighter said he doesn't go to the beach much now but might go more if the trip were easier.

Attendance was sparse. About 30 people came, outnumbered by the agency and consultant staff. That compares with about 300 who came to a similar meeting in Bennettsville on the portion of the road between Hamlet and I-95 near Dillon.

“One way to read that is that people are satisfied with what they are hearing,” said state Rep. Doug Jennings, D- Bennettsville. “There is no outcry against it.”

Jennings leads the North Eastern Strategic Alliance I-73 Committee.

Five people came from Cheraw to plead for building the road nearer to their city. Cheraw, in Chesterfield County, is about five miles west of the planning area for I-73.

Patsy Hendley, president of Greater Cheraw Chamber of Commerce, said she has been working on the I-73 issue since the road was designated in 1991. Earlier, people in Cheraw hoped the road would come their way.

Although they accept that it won't, they would like to see it built closer to the western side of the study area, Hendley said.

Fred Craft, an executive at Cheraw Yarn Mills, has also worked on the I-73 issue for years as a chamber officer and county development board member.

“I'm interested in what I-73 can do for economic development not only for Marlboro County but for Chesterfield County,” Craft said. “I want this road to help both counties.”

The most effective way to do that is to build I-73 between U.S. 1 and S.C. 38 so that it connects with S.C. 9, Craft said. That would give motorists about a seven-mile shot along a four-lane road to Cheraw.

The interstate in that location would serve existing industries, two prisons and an airport, as well as attract new business, Craft said.

Cheraw businesswoman Donna Bilby said she often makes deliveries and personal trips to Myrtle Beach, and that “Myrtle Beach desperately needs something.”

Contact ZANE WILSON at 357-9188 or zwilson@thesunnews.com.