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I-73 ROUTE STIRS DEBATE Zane Wilson The Sun News

For nearly a year, Teri and Merlyn Vaught waited nervously to see what would happen to their livelihood while their 60-year-old family business, Vaught's Grocery, was in one of the possible paths of Interstate 73.

Now, it appears, the new highway will miss their business, coming near to the rear of it with an interchange that may bring a whole new clientele to the store in the northwest corner of Horry County.

“It could help us,” Teri Vaught said Wednesday. “It’s okay.”

The road also bypasses nearby churches and cemeteries that people in her community were worried about, though some residents are not happy with having the road close enough to see and hear.

The story of how the route of I-73, the first interstate to connect to Myrtle Beach, ended up where it is in just less than two years includes those churches in the Vaught's Grocery community, as well as the store itself.

The final proposed route, after starting with 141 possible paths, is among the shortest possibilities so it costs less, and has the least impact on prime farmland and wetland, according to a report by the state Department of Transportation.

However, the Coastal Conservation League, which has been involved in the planning for the road since the beginning, disputes the DOT's findings in the study and disagrees that the chosen path has the least impact.

The state Department of Transportation outlined the factors and process it used in choosing the preferred route in its 500-page Draft Environmental Impact Statement, a report required by federal law.

The report may be viewed at the project Web site, www.i73insc.com.

Public and agency comments on the report, along with detailed information gathered on the preferred route and reasons for adjusting the final path, will be discussed in the final plan. That report is expected to be ready in the spring, followed quickly by a federal permit to build the highway.

Highway planners used a relatively new system to start laying out a path for the road. It is a sophisticated computer program that can draw possible road corridors that show buildings, wetland and streams, garbage dumps, and numerous other features.

The intent was to comply with federal law, which requires that environmental resources such as wetland be avoided, while making the route politically palatable by also avoiding as much disruption to people and their property as possible.

The biggest environmental hurdle is the crossing of the scenic Little Pee Dee River, which forms most of the border between Horry and Marion counties.

The most practical choice, planners said, was at one of the two existing crossings. But both of them have problems. On U.S. 501 at Galivants Ferry, a new crossing could affect the historic district there. At the S.C. 917 crossing farther north, a bridge would affect the Little Pee Dee River Heritage Trust Preserve.

The DOT chose the S.C. 917 crossing for many reasons, mainly the cost of running the road near U.S. 501, but it will have to compensate for the loss of preserve land by buying additional conservation property or restoring damaged wetland.

The method of compensation will be presented in the final report.

The preserve crossing prompted the Coastal Conservation League to file an objection, saying that corridors such as U.S. 501 and S.C. 9 were more appropriate and did not get enough consideration.

Mitchell Metts, I-73 project manager for the DOT, said he would not comment on the criticism because it will be answered in the final report. But he said no other groups had a similar criticism.

The agencies that would be concerned with the preserve crossing and other environmental issues were involved in the highway planning from the beginning and their input played a major role in the choice of routes.

Those agencies were brought into the route-planning process at the beginning so the permit could be obtained faster.

The Coastal Conservation League does not accept the DOT's rationale that the route chosen causes less disruption to land and people, said Nancy Cave, the organization's north coastal director.

``They have done a very poor job of rationalizing the route that they chose," Cave said.
``It appears that it is more of a political decision."

She said the organization does not believe the DOT's assertions that the chosen route will cost less and cause less disruption than building along the existing U.S. 501 or S.C. 9 corridors.

S.C. 9 had the least environmental impacts of any possible route but it was dropped early in the planning, Cave said. Planners said building the highway along existing roads costs more than a new location because of the special access roads that have to be built to allow people to continue to use their property, and the disruption to existing buildings.

Cave said North Carolina is building I-74 mainly along the existing U.S. 74 corridor, so South Carolina should be able to do the same.

Supporters believe the DOT did a good job of picking a path that has the least amount of impact on people and their property as well as on the natural environment.

``This is the corridor with the fewest environmental impacts and the least cost," said state Rep. Alan Clemmons, R-Myrtle Beach, president of the S.C. I-73 Association. ``Fewer impacts are a good thing."

Clemmons said the route selection has been open to involved agencies, private groups such as the Coastal Conservation League and affected citizens, and that all have had an impact on how the path was picked.

Criticizing the route because of its Little Pee Dee River crossing ignores the big picture, that the overall path benefits the most people and hurts the fewest, Clemmons said.

``In the end, there's greater benefit to the community than there is personal impact," he said.

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