

Marlboro, Chesterfield residents tout western I-73 route

Tuesday, Aug 28, 2007 - 08:35 PM

By Charles Tomlinson

SCNow.com- WBTW New Channel 13

HAMLET, N.C. — Residents of Marlboro and Chesterfield counties spoke today in favor of the western alternative route for Interstate 73's northern corridor in South Carolina. "Who ever got off on an exit that says, 'two miles: food'? No one's going to come to us," Marlboro County landscaper Michael Adams said of the Bennettsville area after a public hearing.

The S.C. Department of Transportation held the hearing, during which five people spoke, after an open house at Richmond Community College in Hamlet, N.C. The public hearing was the second on the northern corridor in the past two weeks; the previous hearing was in Bennettsville.

The interstate will run from Michigan to Myrtle Beach. It will cross six states: Michigan, Ohio, the Virginias and the Carolinas.

The interstate's northern route, unveiled July 19, would run from future Interstate 74 near Hamlet, N.C., to Interstate 95 near Latta.

Interstate 73 will run through Marlboro, Dillon, Marion and Horry counties, but only about four miles of the interstate's northern corridor would be in North Carolina.

Cheraw Mayor Andy Ingram said economic impact should have been a more important factor in determining the interstate's preferred route.

Dottie Babb, a lifelong Marlboro County resident, told S.C. Transportation Department officials that many young people don't stay in Marlboro County because of limited employment opportunities.

If studies considered the degree of economic development, she said, "the western route would have stood out as having more potential for economic growth" because of its closeness to an airport, hospital and infrastructure.

Adams also said he's pushing for an overpass on Family Farm Road, where he lives, which he said is a thoroughfare for emergency responders.

Transportation department officials didn't respond to comments Tuesday, but will consider them along with field studies this fall in determining the best plans to minimize the interstate's impact, said Mitchell Metts, SCDOT's Interstate 73 project manager.

"It's an important opportunity for people to share their perspectives," Metts said. "They know the area better than we do."

S.C. Rep. Doug Jennings, D-Bennettsville, said many people have expressed legitimate concerns about the interstate's path, but said overall the interstate is a "lifeline to future growth" in a struggling area.

"Along with that change in the way of life people have become accustomed to for generations will come progress in the bigger sense," he said.

Interstate 73 will cost about \$2 billion in South Carolina. The federal government has approved a request to collect tolls on I-73 to pay for its construction.

The interstate's South Carolina portion will require about 80 miles of new construction. It could take at least 10 years to complete.

SCDOT Director Buck Limehouse has said he thinks the southern part of the interstate in South Carolina will be completed first.

The southern route, announced in May 2006, will run from Interstate 95 west of Latta and into Marion County before connecting in Horry County with S.C. 22, west of Aynor.