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MARLBORO COUNTY IN FAVOR OF I-73 Zane Wilson The Sun News

BENNETTSVILLE Most of the 250 people who came to a public meeting on Interstate 73 here Tuesday evening said they want the road and they want it now.

Bennettsville is the seat of Marlboro County, one of the state's poorest. Residents, public officials and business owners said they see the road as a key to a better life because it will boost the economy.

"Everybody in my district welcomes this," said Marlboro County Councilman Jeff Quick, who represents a district the road is likely to pass through.

Quick said the road will mean new jobs and that people want it even if it takes their home.

"I am surprised at the people that want it as bad as I do," Quick said.

I-73 is planned to connect Myrtle Beach and Sault Ste. Marie, Mich. Proposed routes have been presented for the section between I-95 and Myrtle Beach.

Tuesday's meeting was to get local input on what should be considered in planning a route west of Interstate 95, through Marlboro County, to connect with Interstate 74 near Hamlet, N.C.

The route roughly follows S.C. 38 through Marlboro County.

Quick said the main concern of residents is that I-73 avoid the county's best farmland.

Gerald Owens, who farms about 450 acres of cotton, soybeans and corn near where I-73 could be built, said the road should be run along "the less productive land in the county," not in the area where he farms.

Owens showed road planners a path about a mile west of S.C. 38 where he said the land is not as productive because of the soil. The path also avoids wetland areas, he said.

Road planners say that is the kind of information they want to gather. They showed residents maps that designate wetland in the county and other spots the road is required by law to try to avoid. These include cemeteries and historic sites.

U.S. Rep. John Spratt, D-York, came to hear what residents have to say about the road. Marlboro County is in his congressional district, and he helped get \$81 million for I-73 designated in the highway bill passed last month.

Spratt also was instrumental in the original designation of I-73 in 1991.

State Rep. Doug Jennings, D-Bennettsville, said now that a significant amount of money has been allocated for the road, people can see that "this interstate is now, it's not the future."

People are starting to ask questions about the road and consider its affect on their community, he said.

But most are in favor of I-73, with few people expressing opposition, Jennings said.

"There's an overall sense of joy about it here," he said.

Tim Bethea said his thoughts echo those of most of his neighbors.

"Where a monster like I-73 comes to town, three things come to mind," Bethea said. "Economic development, economic development, economic development."

Bethea, who is black, said there is little opportunity for blacks in Marlboro County and the interstate could change that.

The old guard in the county has prevented progress in the past, including by keeping Wal-Mart out, but I-73 will offer opportunities that some opponents of development cannot stop, Bethea said.

Real estate agent Terrie Sheets also looks forward to the new road.

"We feel it would do wonderful things for our community," she said. "We need some growth here."

One resident said Marlboro County doesn't need I-73. It should be a toll road with no entrances and exits in Marlboro County, said Tom O'Neal, a farmer who lives in the Brownsville community.

"All we are doing is getting 'em to Myrtle Beach and back," so Marlboro County doesn't need exits, he said.

When asked about other residents' views that the road would bring new industry and jobs, O'Neal said he doesn't think it will.

N.C. officials also attended the meeting. Derrick Weaver, I-73 project manager for the N.C. Department of Transportation, said his agency is fully on board with the project.

At one time, some North Carolinians did not appear interested in I-73, but an agreement between the Carolinas signed in February means South Carolina will plan and build about four miles of I-73 in North Carolina, and North Carolina will plan and build about four miles of I-74 in South Carolina. I-74 is expected to connect with Carolina Bays Parkway.

G.R. Kinley, an N.C. DOT commissioner from Rockingham, also said his state is ready to move on the project. Kinley was instrumental in swaying his board to the February agreement.

``We're anxious to get a hookup," Kinley said.

The S.C. DOT also will hold a public meeting on I-73 in Rockingham in about three weeks, but it has not been scheduled.

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