

Residents voice concerns over I-73

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By Terry Ward

Details about the next public I-73 meeting

Federal and state planners have been on a lengthy campaign to make Interstate 73 a reality, but tonight, members of the public got a chance to speak out about the preferred northern route.

The northern route, which was unveiled July 19, will enter South Carolina in Marlboro County, just south of Hamlet, N.C., and run parallel to S.C. 38 into Dillon County to I-95. It will run east of Bennettsville and west of Tatum.

“The way they will have to cut off roads, I’ll have to drive 20 miles out of the way to go a half-mile,” said Michael Adams, who lives on Family Farm Road between Bennettsville and McColl.

Adams voiced his concern about the closing of smaller access roads so that the proposed I-73 can be built. He spoke at a public hearing presented by the S.C. Department of Transportation.

At the meeting, crowds gathered around 20-foot long, eight-foot tall aerial maps of the I-73 route set up in the Marlboro County High School Commons Area, with many people pinpointing their property with a touch of the map.

John Scism of Bennettsville said he isn’t satisfied that the best route was chosen for the northern corridor of the proposed interstate, which will enter South Carolina in Marlboro County.

“A more western route path, closer to Wallace, would serve existing industry and commerce much better since it makes I-73 more accessible for trucks,” he said.

Scism said the route chosen — dubbed the “central” route by the SCDOT — will save five minutes for tourists on the way to the beach. He argued, however, that the western route would help provide more job opportunities for residents in Marlboro, Chesterfield and Darlington counties.

Doris Breeden, area director for the S.C. Employment Security Commission, said the path of the interstate as it is will bring jobs because industries want to be close to an interstate.

But Adams said he expects the interstate, which could take to 10 years to build and cost as much as \$2 billion for the South Carolina portion alone, to harm Bennettsville.

“The tourists going to the beach will bypass Bennettsville. Come back five years after (I-73) is built and you’ll see shops and businesses closed up,” said Adams, the owner of a landscaping company.

Adams and Scism were given two minutes each to express their concerns to SCDOT officials. Officials recorded all comments by the public, but did not respond to them. The public input will be reviewed in the next two weeks, said Mitchell Metts, SCDOT’s I-73 project manager.

Metts said he wasn’t surprised that a lot of dissatisfaction was expressed at Tuesday’s hearing.

“There are people who will be adversely affected and they are more likely to speak,” he said. “That is not unusual at a public hearing. We anticipate that.”

Rep. Doug Jennings, D-Bennettsville, hailed I-73 as “one of the most significant infrastructure projects that will come our way for generations.” But he said he understands the worries of those who oppose where exactly the interstate could be built.

“People hold their personal property right as very dear,” he said. “I understand their ire. It is a very emotional issue.”

A second public hearing about I-73’s preferred northern route is scheduled for later this month across the South Carolina state line in Hamlet, N.C.

Officials from the SCDOT hailed July’s announcement of the plan for the northern route as a significant milestone in the plan for the proposed interstate, which will cross six states — Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia and the Carolinas — and connect Myrtle Beach to Michigan if it is built. It will traverse 60 miles in four Pee Dee counties.

The proposed southern route of I-73, announced in May 2006, will run from I-95, west of Latta and into Marion County before connecting to S.C. 22 in Horry County, near Aynor.

The southern portion of the route still must be approved via federal permit, which is expected happen as soon an agreement to cross a heritage preserve involving 27 acres at the Little Pee Dee River can be reached. That issue could be resolved as early as this month.