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RESIDENTS ON ROUTE RESIGNED TO CHANGE

Tonya Root The Sun News

Outside the old general store in Ketchuptown, at Rabon's Crossroads, in a couple tobacco fields and several other small communities along the preferred I-73 route announced Tuesday, residents asked the \$2 billion question: "Where is Interstate 73 going?"

Many of Horry County's lifelong residents and farmers weren't pleased with the I-73 route transportation officials and planners announced Tuesday. Those in the path of the road were upset, but many shrugged off the decision saying they felt like there's nothing they can do or say now to make a difference.

Goats, chickens and cows graze next to fields full of green leafy tobacco and corn where officials plan to build the \$2 billion road to link S.C. 22 with Interstate 95. Small communities like Ketchuptown, fertile with history, are in the path of the road that officials say they hope to complete in about a decade.

"Our little community is going to change. I'm glad granddaddy isn't here to see it," Ketchuptown resident Andrew Atkinson said. His farm just off Lake Swamp Road has been in the family for 69 years, and even though it won't be directly affected by the road, the landscape of his community will change once a highway divides it, he said.

Marcia Johnson walked up to Atkinson and others gathered in front of the former Ketchuptown store Tuesday evening and asked, "Where's it going to go? Through here?"

She studied a map with the preferred route for I-73 highlighted, shook her head and said: "For it to come that close to my house, I'd rather it take out the whole thing than to be that close. Yes, I'd rather find some place else to live than to be at the bottom of the interstate." Johnson has lived for 33 years in the white house with red shutters at the corner of Nichols Highway and Lake Swamp Road. The preferred route appears less than a half mile from her home.

Her neighbor, Ray Buffkin, whose wife's family built the former Ketchuptown general store in 1927, said he's not upset by the route, but his wife and her sisters will be. The 49-year-old said he's lived with his wife in the house she was born in behind the store for the past 35 years. They raised two sons there. But he will sell the land, house and store to make way for the road.

"I was hoping it would take it. I'm ready to move," Buffkin said as he waved to a passing truck and called out their names. "I don't know of any place else I'd rather stay at, it's quiet and all the neighbors are friendly."

Officials said the road affects 1,708 acres of farmland, which includes the 40 acres Richard Rabon has lived and worked on for 76 years. In fields once filled with tobacco, today Rabon plants corn and beans. He is unsure what he would do if the road takes his family farm.

“There's plenty of places it can go without interfering with this land. I know it's got to go somewhere but just not here,” he said. “This road isn't going to do what they think it's going to do. I mean, look at [S.C.] 22. It's ain't helped [U.S.] 501 traffic.”

But Rabon's neighbor across the street, Horace Ranson, doesn't mind where the road goes. He'll pick up and move, as difficult as that would be this late in his life, he said.

“It's okay with me. I'd let them go through here, wouldn't be much I could do about it,” Ranson said.

Ranson's wife, Effie Ranson, said when neighbors began to argue over the road and its whereabouts she expected it to come through their little community off Valley Forge Road.

“I got a feeling it was coming through here when they started talking about it. It's going to come through whether we want it or not,” Effie Ranson said. “We might not be here when it comes, so there's no need to worrying. There ain't a thing in the world I can do about it but wait. If they say move, I move.”

Not far away along Joyner Swamp Road, part of the preferred route clips the corner of Tommie Johnson's family farm. As she sat on her back porch Tuesday overlooking fields of tobacco and corn, Johnson said she hadn't given much thought to the possibility of the road taking her land.

“I'd rather give a little bit if that's what they need to help the county out,” Johnson said. “But they're going to have to learn to use these new roads because people have not switched over from 501 to 22 or 31 like they were supposed to. Nobody is happy with it, but what can you do?”

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