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## THE STRUGGLE TO GET THERE FROM HERE

Zane Wilson The Sun News

COLUMBIA Those planning the 60-mile S.C. route for Interstate 73 as it slices to the coast have this message for those who fear they're in the path: Don't panic.

The routes already are being adjusted based on more than 1,000 comments gleaned from public meetings and correspondence, planners said.

The road the planners traveled to come up with the 15 tentative route choices has been filled with obstacles: wetland, historical sites, archeological sites. The route to completion of the interstate that proponents say is critical to the area's continued tourism growth isn't likely to be any smoother.

In addition to addressing concerns from residents, planners also are wrestling with intense lobbying from Horry County Council, which wants to restore a southern connector to that route list.

As the first round of public meetings showed, even when planners thought they'd maneuvered around some of those obstacles - such as the historical Galivants Ferry site - they still raised complaints.

"I don't like it at all," Michelle Collins said of one of the proposed I-73 routes.

"I live out on Joyner Swamp Road, and one of the maps shows it going right through my house," said Collins, who works at the Galivants Ferry Convenience Store. "That's my home. That's all I've ever known. My mama and daddy live on one side and, well, we all live right there and have for four or five generations at least. I've been there forever."

Now the planners' task is to take into account the human factor, such as complaints received from the Aynor area, said Skip Johnson, a planner with LPA Group, the S.C. Department of Transportation's consultants on the I-73 corridor.

"I know a lot of people are really upset, and I don't blame them," he said.

Their concerns are part of the process and are being taken seriously, said Johnson and Mitchell Metts, the DOT's I-73 project manager.

"We got a lot of good, good suggestions at those meetings," Johnson said.

“I’ve probably got 1,000 comments,” including in person at the public meetings, by mail and by e-mail, Metts said. “It’s exactly what we want, which is to engage the public early.”

‘Wiggle room’ for concerns

Metts said some people see the corridor as going through their property, but the lines shown on the map represent a half-mile distance. The actual roadway will be 400 feet wide.

The half-mile corridor allows for some “wiggle room,” Metts said, and even if someone’s house is inside a line, that doesn’t mean it would automatically be taken by the road.

John “Moot” Truluck, a DOT commissioner who represents part of the road’s territory, said the wiggle room allows for a lot of accommodation of people’s concerns, and he expects many objections will be alleviated when the final proposal is presented.

There are ways to work the lines in the general territory where they currently are proposed that will minimize the effect on homes, farms and communities, the planners said.

Bob Lee, the Federal Highway Administration’s director for South Carolina, said the flurry of resistance to the early corridor proposals “is quite common and very understandable.”

Planners also acknowledge it is not possible to build the road without moving some people and interfering with some property.

“No matter where we put the road, somebody’s not going to like it,” Metts said.

Johnson gave an example of what sometimes happens when planners try to tweak the routes to avoid areas where people have complained. The planners were trying to get around a Carolina Bay, but in doing so they would have cut through a small community. So they decided to skirt the edge of the bay instead.

The proposed corridor loops around the Galivants Ferry historical district, but some residents say it’s still too close.

Christy Holliday Douglas, a member of the Galivants Ferry family that puts on the famous political stump meeting, told planners early on that the road should follow closer to S.C. 9, not U.S. 501.

Residents of the Cool Spring area have been the most vocal, saying the interstate should run along U.S. 378 instead of the area of U.S. 501. They, council members and some legislators say fewer people and farms would be affected in that area.

Johnson said if the proposed route shifted, those other people probably would be just as vocal that their property should not be disturbed.

Others say U.S. 501 or S.C. 9 should be remodeled into I-73, but that kind of construction poses even more problems and costs than building a new road, Johnson said.

“The existing roads, that's where the people are,” he said.

To convert an existing highway into an interstate means obliterating one side or the other of the road to build new access roads or frontage roads, which are expensive. It also means higher costs for buying houses and commercial sites, he said.

Metts said that although some people have complained they were left out of the process, the DOT has gone beyond what is required in state and federal law. The public was invited to meetings last fall, before the lines were drawn, to provide information.

“So we have engaged the public,” Metts said.

Some, including Boyd, questioned why the DOT was deciding the road routes.

“That's what we do,” Metts said. He and the other I-73 planners are also the ones trained to route the road according to the federal law, he said.

State Rep. Alan Clemmons, president of the S.C. I-73 Association, said following federal law is important in the quest for federal money.

“I want it built with as much federal funding as possible,” he said. The 60-mile-long S.C. portion of the road is expected to cost about \$2 billion. It is the DOT's highest priority for new construction.

The rules of the road

In mapping the routes, the DOT is following federal law, which requires it to first find the least damaging possible corridors for a new road, project manager Metts said.

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 forces the DOT to begin the routing by studying the paths least destructive to the environment. If the project expects to spend federal money, “you've got to do it,” Metts said.

Lee said the DOT has come up with workable preliminary corridors.

Preliminary talks with regulatory agencies and conservation groups produced the cautions that the project should stay clear of the Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge, DOT officials say.

To keep the project moving, the DOT commission agreed in July to narrow the study area for I-73, taking the refuge out of consideration.

In August, the study began with a meeting of DOT and Federal Highway Administration planners along with about 30 representatives from federal and state regulatory agencies. They again urged caution about other environmentally sensitive areas as well as historical and archeological sites.

The result is the preliminary corridors presented to the public in the past month.

These are "primarily based on environmental issues and concerns" but also take into account factors including churches, historical sites and contaminated land, Metts said.

To arrive at the proposed lines, the planners used information gathered from the public and community leaders in a series of regional meetings last fall.

Then they used computers to draw possibilities that excluded significant wetland areas, historical sites, churches and other features that are available in databases.

From that first run of the computer, 15 possible lines were produced. The planners used those to gather more detail of what is on the ground and narrowed those 15 into the ones presented to the public.

"These lines represent a collaborative effort with all the federal and state environmental agencies," Metts said. "These agencies have regulatory authority. If we don't have their approval, we don't have a project."

The southern route

Although it is possible, theoretically, to add a southern study area to those lines, "it would be a significant delay," Lee said, most likely resulting in denial of a construction permit.

Horry County Council members met with the DOT on Friday in hopes the agency would support consideration of a southern route, but the request was flatly denied.

Council members Howard Barnard and John Boyd were not deterred and said if the agency does not act within two weeks, they will hold a news conference at the state capital to rally support.

The state Department of Transportation says the proposed corridors were not drafted to appease conservation organizations that threatened lawsuits, as Horry Councilman John Boyd said recently.

"They're all making it seem like the routes that have been chosen are in fear of environmental groups," Clemmons said. "It's just not true."

Planners consider it better to stay north and link with Veterans Highway because it takes advantage of a road that needs only a small amount of work to make it interstate-grade.

Johnson said even if Horry County wanted to build the more southern route with its own money, the county would have to get federal permits to disturb wetland, and it probably would not succeed.

“There's been a lot of work and a lot of money expended on these corridors,” Truluck said. To move the study area now “I would think would be a real setback,” he said.

It's not the commission's place to interfere with the staff at this point, he said. But when a final proposal is presented, “If we don't like it, we can do something about it.”

Rep. Thad Viers, R-Myrtle Beach, said he worries that demands for a southern route study will delay the project.

“It's not just Horry County's road,” he said. “It's South Carolina's interstate.”

Staff writers Travis Tritten and Janet Blackmon Morgan contributed to this report.

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Illustration: Photos by Janet Blackmon Morgan/The Sun News and a map titled: Interstate 73

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