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Page: C1

SMART I-73 PATH URGED Zane Wilson The Sun News

CONWAY Most of the 150 people who came to a public meeting on Interstate 73 on Tuesday evening said the road should be built along existing corridors, either S.C. 38 to U.S. 501 and S.C. 22, or along S.C. 9.

Two area conservation groups already have endorsed the S.C. 38 to U.S. 501 idea. Using existing corridors wherever possible, bypassing towns such as Aynor and building frontage roads for property owners will cause less environmental damage and help the project move more quickly, supporters say.

Most of the S.C. 38-U.S. 501 path is lightly populated, said Jane Lareau, a staff member of the Coastal Conservation League, one of the groups recommending the route.

``We rode every inch of this route," she said. ``There are very few houses, if any, that would be hit."

Although the group recommends bypassing Galivants Ferry, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, one resident there is very worried about her village and home.

Christy Holliday Douglas, a member of the Holliday family that has lived at Galivants Ferry for 200 years and puts on its famed political stump meeting, said I-73 should follow S.C. 9.

``Mullins is starving. Latta, those people are dying," Douglas said. Routing I-73 along U.S. 501 would not help those areas as much as the more northern S.C. 9 route, she said.

Gault ``Bunny" Beeson, chief executive officer of Wildlife Action, said his organization also supports using existing corridors but doesn't want Galivants Ferry harmed.

One reason Galivants Ferry is suggested as a route is the existing Little Pee Dee River crossing. Using it would avoid building a new crossing over the river, much of which is in conservation areas.

``Crossing the Little Pee Dee and all the wetlands, that's got to be the biggest environmental obstacle," said state Rep. Alan Clemmons, R-Myrtle Beach. Clemmons is chairman of the S.C. I-73 Association.

Mitchell Metts, I-73 project manager for the state Department of Transportation, agreed the Little Pee Dee crossing is the biggest environmental problem for the project.

Some pointed to a crossing near Nichols that has a narrower band of river wetland, but others said there is too much wetland farther east of the river that would have to be disturbed if that area is used.

Gloria Bonali of Conway was among those who wants the road to follow S.C. 9, but she wants it to be an environmentally friendly as possible.

“The way they destroy wetlands around here is a crime,” she said.

Tony Miliote of Murrells Inlet came because he wants the area to have an interstate connection, but one that does as little harm as possible.

“We do have to protect our wetlands,” Miliote said.

Pat Walker, also a Murrells Inlet resident, said she wants the road for better access to other areas.

“I hope they get this. It's long overdue,” she said.

Walker said she is a volunteer with Habitat for Humanity and sees poverty that could be aided by economic development the road could bring.

Some wrote down comments on large notebooks.

“Make sure tourists use I-73 instead of 501 through Conway,” one comment read.

“Stay off my dirt!” said another, listed as a Juniper Bay Road resident of a 300-year-old family farm.

Even though Georgetown County is not included in the study area for the road's path, Murray Vernon came representing the Georgetown County Chamber of Commerce Economic Development and Transportation Committee.

He said he hopes the route will be changed so I-73 will be extended toward Georgetown, rather than end in Myrtle Beach.

If not, the area will still benefit from the interstate and “we need to get moving on it while the momentum is there,” Vernon said.

Taking the opposite approach from Vernon were about 150 people who presented a petition saying they oppose extending I-73 into Georgetown County, or making U.S. 701 four lanes without public input.

Clemmons said that he was encouraged by the turnout and that the comments which show agreement that the road is needed, if not where it should be put.

Within six months, planners will come up with possible routes for public review.

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