

# U.S. 321 change alarms business owners

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DAVID PREWITT | NEWS-TOPIC

A MDI truck turns from U.S. 321 North onto Alex Lee Boulevard at the MDI entrance Friday afternoon.



Sharon Grindstaff and her father were stunned to learn at a public meeting July 27 that their business, SunLife Sunrooms, Spas & More, would suffer a major blow from a tweak to plans for widening U.S. 321 that would destroy the current main access to the business, as well as all of the parking.

They aren't the only ones. Up and down the part of the highway south of Granite Falls, businesses and homes will see all or a big part of their property bought by the state to make way for the road, especially in the area where the N.C. Department of Transportation now plans to put an interchange to handle trucking traffic associated with Merchants Distributors Inc. But the News-Topic found last week, two weeks after the meeting where that interchange plan was unveiled, that at least two of the business owners who would be most affected were not aware of the change.

"They didn't tell people," Grindstaff said, "it was terrible."

Grindstaff, the business manager of SunLife, and her father, John Dunn, the owner, have submitted complaints and suggested alternatives to the NCDOT, but Grindstaff said that at the July 27 meeting they didn't get much encouragement from an NCDOT worker that it would help.

"(That's what) the guy told us to do: submit comments," Grindstaff said. "He said it's pretty much useless -- he didn't say 'useless,' he said it's probably not going to get changed."

The public comment period ended Aug. 10, but Dunn, Grindstaff and their neighbors led an email and letter-writing campaign and also have organized a community meeting for Monday at 7 p.m. at Grace Chapel United Methodist Church in hopes of enlisting the help of the Caldwell County Board of Commissioners and state Rep. Destin Hall, whose district covers Caldwell County, to pressure the NCDOT to extend the comment period and make changes to minimize the effect on their businesses.

Project Development Engineer Eugene Tarascio said the NCDOT is "getting these comments and reviewing them," but it's unlikely the comments period will be extended.

The NCDOT plans to widen about 14 miles of highway, from U.S. 70 in Hickory north to Southwest Boulevard in Lenoir, but the only widening work for which there currently is funding is from U.S. 70 to the U.S. 321-A intersection in Granite Falls. Work on that segment tentatively is scheduled to begin in 2021.

The key feature of the entire length of the project is the highway's conversion to a "superstreet," in which all direct left turns are eliminated, requiring drivers to go past where they wish to go and then make a U-turn.

Plans unveiled last year for that southernmost segment showed the possibility of an interchange where Grace Chapel Road meets the highway, but at the July 27 meeting that was gone. Instead, the plan now shows an interchange coming from the property of MDI, a wholesale grocery distributor with several hundred of tractor-trailers turning in and out of Alex Lee Boulevard each day, most of them needing to go south -- left -- as they leave MDI.

Tarascio said that some of the complaints about last year's plan were about the difficulty of tractor-trailers being able to safely make U-turns in the highway's heavy traffic.

"Many people felt that trucks from MDI would have difficulty accessing 321 and didn't like the idea of those trucks making U-turns," he said. "MDI expressed this and even the citizens."

The interchange would make that truck traffic safer, but Dunn said his business and its neighbors will be ones to pay for it. His building, for instance, will lose not only parking but direct access from the highway, with a new access road cutting behind the building, which Grindstaff said is both inconvenient and puts the business's worst face forward to customers.

"If you look at the back of our building, it's not appetizing for customers," she said. "I mean, it's the back of a building."

Grindstaff said there would appear to be alternatives that would help MDI without hurting other businesses, such as diverting the trucks to New Farm Road and Grace Chapel Road, then putting an interchange at Grace Chapel Road.

Tarascio said such suggestions will be considered, but it's impossible to please everybody.

One of the reasons that the alternative for an interchange at Grace Chapel Road was eliminated, Tarascio said, is that the opening of New Farm Road in 2015 allowed traffic from the Grace Chapel area to reach U.S. 321 near U.S. 321-A, diverting a large amount of traffic away from Grace Chapel Road. The original traffic forecast for the Grace Chapel Road intersection predicted that by 2040 more than 21,000 cars a day would enter and leave the highway there, but after New Farm Road opened that prediction dropped to 7,300 a day.

But Tarascio acknowledged that the new interchange proposal has a larger effect on nearby property owners, with nine homes and nine businesses in the right-of-way area. There are no buildings in the area that would be affected by a Grace Chapel Road interchange.

Kimberly Teff, owner of Teff Hair Design Studio near SunLife, said she learned from Dunn how her business will be affected. She's not happy, but Teff has been in her building for 10 years and doesn't plan to move if the interchange goes ahead.

"I said, you know what, if these are the cards are dealt, I'm gonna play them," she said.

But Raquel Haberer thinks the new interchange could push out her business, Haberer Insurance, which operates in space she rents from Dunn in the SunLife center. She said the interchange would inconvenience her customers too much.

"I felt comfortable (with the first plan), it was going to be a headache, but my business was going to be OK," Haberer said. "With what's happening now, I don't see how I can continue doing business in this area."

Tarascio said that while major changes may be unlikely, there are still many steps to go and a number of groups that will review the plan before it is final, which is expected to be next spring.

"I wouldn't say it's set in stone," he said.