


Highway will take bite -- but how big?

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Pam Connelly sits on the porch of her home overlooking U.S. 321, the highway she knows will come closer to her door with the widening plans.



Pam Connelly lives in the house south of Granite Falls that her parents bought the year she graduated high school, 1964. Then, her mother told her it would be worth something one day, but Connelly never believed her. Now, the North Carolina Department of Transportation will likely buy part of her land, off U.S. 321, and bring the highway even closer to her home.

"I don't want to be 70, sitting on my front porch looking over a six-lane highway," Connelly said.

But exactly how much of her land would be bought, how close U.S. 321 may get to her house and what that will do to what the rest of property might be worth Connelly does not know, and she wants answers.

The NCDOT project is the widening of U.S. 321 to six lanes. It is hotly debated on all fronts -- some don't like the so-called "superstreet" design, which allows only right turns and U-turns, some business owners feel the road plan will make it harder for customers to reach them, and others simply see the project as unnecessary.

See Highway/Page A5

Property owners whose land and buildings fall under the area the NCDOT will need for the road are the possibly the people most impacted by the project, including Connelly, whose main concern is whether the road will reduce the value of the land and house she had planned to leave for her children.

"The closer they come, the less my property is worth," Connelly said. "Every foot it puts me closer to the highway, my property value's going to go down."

Based on the revised project maps unveiled in July, more than 50 properties in Caldwell County will be affected by state purchases of right of way for the expansion in the first phase of the project, which stretches north from U.S. 70 in Hickory to U.S. 321-A in Granite Falls. Purchasing of the land for the road is scheduled to begin next summer 2018, and construction is set to begin in 2021.

Most of these properties are owned by individuals, including Connelly, but about 10 are owned by big companies, including Duke Energy, which owns the site of an electrical substation near the Grace Chapel Road intersection, and Merchant Distributors Inc., which operates a grocery distribution warehouse in the area.

However, there will be no official count of the properties affected until plans are made final, Project Engineer Gene Tarascio said. That will be after the public comments are addressed, utilities and water lines are worked out, multiple government agencies approve the plans, and another environmental assessment is done. The meeting to address the comments is set for Sept. 22, Tarascio said.

The updated environmental assessment will count the number of properties, buildings and businesses affected by the new plan. The environmental assessment done on the 2016 version of the project plans showed about 60 demolitions of homes and businesses would be caused between U.S. 70 in Hickory and Grace Chapel Road. That assessment did not count affected properties north of Grace Chapel Road.

Along most of the road, the NCDOT will need to buy right of way extending 120 to 130 feet beyond either side of the current highway, according to the 2016 environmental assessment, but more will be needed where interchanges are to be built, said Daneil Miles, N.C. Department of Transportation division agent for the Division 11 right of way office.

A revision to the plan involving an interchange is one of the most controversial parts of the project proposal made public in July: Instead of putting an interchange where Grace Chapel Road meets the highway, which would affect just a few developed properties, the NCDOT now proposes putting one at Alex Lee Boulevard, the entrance to MDI's warehouse, because of the hundreds of tractor-trailers going in and out there every day.

Among the developed properties that fall under the proposed footprint of the Alex Lee Boulevard interchange are four houses on the west side of the highway, the buildings that house Catawba Valley Motors, Roto-Rooter Plumbing & Drain Services and Grogan Construction, and vacant land owned by Avis Starnes and Sam Starnes. Much of a business property where SunLife Spas, Sunrooms & More is, owned by John Dunn, would also need to be bought by NCDOT.

On the east side of U.S. 321, some MDI property would be purchased for the northbound off-ramp.

Notification to affected property owners will not begin until the plans are final, Miles said, which could be next summer.

The right-of-way purchasing process starts with initial contact with the property owners, Miles said. Then the property is appraised, and state agents decide whether to buy the entire property or only the part needed for the road. After that the state makes an offer to the homeowner, and negotiation begins if necessary.

Miles said this first part of the U.S. 321 widening plan has more buildings and businesses in the right of way than most plans, though more so in the Hickory portion than in Caldwell County.

"There's going to be some problems that will be unique," Miles said.

When building owners know ahead of time about the plans, she said, the process goes smoother, but it is still telling someone their home or business will be bought for a road.

"It is hard because they're individuals just like I am," Miles said.

Connelly said not knowing for sure what will happen is the hardest part.

"In this situation, the biggest thing is the lack of communication from the state," she said. "This whole thing, not knowing, has left us all in a blue funk."

Connelly went to the July 27 public meeting where NCDOT unveiled its revised plans. She said Tarascio assured her then that the effect on her property would be minimal, but she is still worried about her property value and how much she may get from the state.

"I know I'm not gonna get anything out of them," she said.

After writing letters, making calls and even considering hiring a lawyer, Connelly doesn't know what to do next.

"I don't know what to say, what to do," she said. "I'm at my rope's end."

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