LOCAL NEWS

Pickens sees interchange as road to growth

Simms School Road access would open up tracts near Central

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The section of Simms School Road that passes over U.S. 123 near Central is hardly a bustling thoroughfare today.

But Pickens County leaders are betting that could change, and about 3,000 acres of rural land could become among some of the most desirable tracts in Pickens County – if an interchange linking the two roads is constructed.

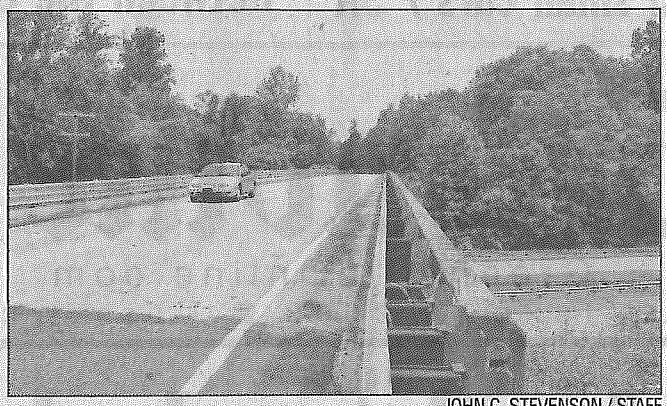
"The topography of a lot of the properties in Pickens County is so severe, it makes it extremely difficult to develop," said Pickens County Administrator Chappell Hurst. "The properties that lie off of 123 in this area ... are much flatter and gently rolling. It makes it where you could develop it."

Hurst said council members have submitted to the state Department of Transportation a study of the potential impact of the intersection, in hopes the roughly $5 million project can be funded with federal stimulus money.

"Once they shake out the projects that they can't do, maybe there'll be some money left over" for the interchange project, Hurst said.

The county has already found a partner to help solve another piece of the infrastructure puzzle. As part of its building program, the School District of Pickens County is helping pay for sewer and water lines to be extended to the site of the planned career center on Chastain Road. The project, which carries a $1.7 million price tag according to school district spokeswoman Julie Thompson, will make sewer and water service available along U.S. 123 from Eighteen Mile Road to U.S. 178, Hurst said.

"The sewer line that we're extending from the 18 Mile Creek sewer plant to the new school would make that property very developable, if we can get an interchange put in there," Hurst said.



JOHN C. STEVENSON / STAFF

A motorist passes over U.S. 123 on Simms School Road. County officials say a U.S. 123-Simms School Road interchange would open vast tracts of land to development.

Hurst said the area comprises several large tracts of land – 300 to 800 acres – that will benefit from the infrastructure improvements, and could become attractive to "large-scale businesses."

And new businesses mean more money and jobs for Pickens County, according to Ray Farley, executive director of Alliance Pickens.

"Development in Pickens County has historically been limited by the lack of infrastructure and appropriate surface roads," Farley said. "That interchange has the potential to open up more land, for both job-creative purposes, as well as housing and commercial uses."

Farley said, however, that the county needs to have more than just infrastructure to ensure the best use of the land. He said the county needs to develop and implement a plan to attract a variety of commercial interests.

"As we develop more property for job-creative purposes in Pickens County, it'll be important that we use those properties to attract and develop companies and technologies and products that heretofore did not exist in Pickens County," Farley said.

Hurst said the county won't know until the fall whether the project will receive stimulus funds. But he said the need for the interchange won't diminish.

"Even if we don't get the (interchange funding) now, it's something that needs to be done, from an economic development standpoint, for Pickens County," he said.