Roads, bridges tops for DOT

Sheep Farm Road, S.C. 123/133 are department priorities

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For transportation officials, whose livelihood involves road and bridge repairs, the work is never done.

More projects than money to fund them provides a never-ending challenge of prioritizing areas of greatest need, leaving some on waiting lists that often stretch out for years.

"There's so many checks and balances we have to hit," said South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT) Program Manager Rob Perry. "Sometimes, people think when we come out with a plan that we can go ahead and get started. But we have to do an environmental assessment, like we did with Sheep Farm Road, which often takes a year to complete. It also takes a while to get the federal highways to give you the money."

Sheep Farm Road

As program manager for SCDOT, Perry is responsible for overseeing a project from the design to construction phase. He is also involved in decisions that include construction dates and traffic studies.

Two major projects are presently on Perry's plate — Sheep Farm Road in Oconee County and the S.C.133 bridge replacement in Clemson — though construction on both won't begin until early 2010.

An increase in traffic volume led to the approval of the Sheep Farm Road widening project. In 2005, a traffic count showed that 6,900 vehicles per day traveled. Projections say that figure will climb to 14,700 by 2030.

Initially, the project, which is scheduled to take 18 months to complete, featured several options that included the widening of Bountyland Road. But Perry said the alignment ultimately approved involved allowing Sheep Farm Road to continue north of Bountyland and tie into S.C. Highway 28, north of Oconee Memorial Park.

"If we still show congestion when the project is completed, we would go back and widen Bountyland," Perry said.

There are 20 to 30 total pieces of property, involving six homes that face relocation.

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Jessica Nelms/Staff

Studies projecting the flow of traffic on Sheep Farm Road to more than double by 2030 have led to approval of a widening project that is set to begin next year.

IMPROVEMENTS

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S.C. 133 bridge replacement project

Clemson officials and area residents undoubtedly had to pinch themselves upon learning that $6.14 million in federal stimulus money had been awarded to the city for the S.C. Highway 133 (College Avenue) road widening and bridge replacement project. The area has long been a concern to residents and leaders, going back more than 30 years.

The city learned in March that it would receive stimulus money to go with the $4.5 million the city had already budgeted for the improvements. While the actual cost of the project is estimated at $8 million, the extra $2.5 million will be applied to the Sheep Farm Road project.

Officials say the project is a system upgrade that will greatly improve traffic flow at the intersection of S.C. 133 (College Avenue) and U.S. 76/123 (Tiger Boulevard). The existing railroad bridge will be removed and a temporary bridge installed for trains to use as well as an additional track for future light rail capabilities.

The project will also consist of widening S.C. 133 to add two lanes and a middle lane, and the city has also budgeted an additional $200,000 for water and sewer relocations and mast-arm traffic signals for the upgraded intersection.

Perry said money was factor regarding the much needed, but often delayed project.

According to Perry, the average daily traffic at the intersection is 31,600. However, that figure is expected to rise to 36,000 by 2025. Double turning lanes, he said, would alleviate major congestion.

Plans call for bids to be received in March 2010. Construction is expected to begin in June 2010 and take18 months to complete.

Now that the widening project has been selected, the next step Perry said is to ensure that it has the least impact on residents and business owners in the Calhoun area.

During the June 25 meeting, Zach Corontzes, who along with brothers Nick, George and Ted own Calhoun Corners located across from Elm Street, expressed concern not only about access to the family business but also structural integrity that could be compromised by the project.

"That building was built in 1893 and you can already hear it rattle when the train rumbles by, so we're worried about the structural integrity to that historic building," he said.

Perry said steps can be taken to ensure that nearby properties are not damaged.

"When it gets closer to construction, we will put in a monitoring system to see if the pile driving is creating enough of an impact on the buildings," Perry said. "We can also predrill holes to lessen the impact on pile driving.

"We want to make sure what is there stays there and doesn't damage any properties."

Other projects

There are a number of other road resurfacing and bridge replacement projects scheduled to take place in Oconee and Pickens over the next year.

Perry said all projects must now be ranked in order of priority. There are the design, surveying, soil borings, utility relocations and environmental steps that must be followed. Funding must also be obtained, meaning most projects take anywhere from 18 to 30 months from start to finish.

Ryan Miller, resident construction engineer for Oconee County, said additional projects include Walnut Street, between Wells Highway and the railroad tracks, which also received stimulus funds.

Coupled with that project, Miller said Chattooga Ridge Road, in Mountain Rest north of S.C. Highway 107, involves mixing existing pavement with soil, adding cement and water and adding two layers of asphalt.

Both roads, part of one major project and due for completion Nov. 30, will cost a combined $2.1 million. Another project — on West Bennett Road on secondary 109 that runs from S.C. Highway 183 to U.S. Highway 76, and involves two-foot widening and resurfacing — was recently let for $681,000.

"Down the road, there will be various sidewalk and resurfacing projects in Oconee County," Miller said.

Mack Kelly, public works director for Oconee County, said reduced funding would hamper the number of road and bridge projects that would normally have occurred this fiscal year.

"We typically get about $2.5 million for our total projects of roads and culverts, but, this year, we were limited to half a million dollars each," Kelly said. "We're down a million and a half from normal funding."