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Widening of Highway 9 revs up debate

Pay for costly upgraded road, or just more lanes?

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A \$30 million project to widen about four miles of Highway 9 has sparked a debate about whether additional asphalt is enough for the bustling business corridor or if the county should implement a more progressive, though probably more costly, pedestrian-friendly design.

At Rainbow Lake Road in Boiling Springs, the highway narrows to two lanes, with no sidewalks on either side.

The S.C. Department of Transportation's preliminary plans to widen it to five lanes from Rainbow Lake Road to Highway 292 include landscaped medians where they are feasible, two-way bike lanes, and sidewalks on both sides of the highway, separated from traffic by strips of grass.

"That's what we've been told to kind of shoot for," said Penny Phillips, DOT assistant program manager for the Spartanburg Area Transportation Study.

Phillips introduced a preliminary proposal for a "typical section" of the widened highway to the SPATS policy committee at a meeting early in November. Implementing that design probably would not be possible for the entire 4.3 miles of highway because of cost, she said in a phone interview. For instance, a cemetery flanks the road for a stretch and road grades have to be considered.

But SPATS personnel have asked for the "complete street" design where possible, she added.

"They definitely want as much green space as they can get," Phillips said. "And I think there's a whole issue of how comfortable does a pedestrian feel walking down the road if they're so close to the road."

Spartanburg County Council approved a resolution in July endorsing the implementation of "complete streets," or streets that accommodate use by pedestrians, bicyclists and the public transit system.

Construction to widen Highway 9 likely would occur in two phases because of the project's high cost, and the first phase probably would not begin until 2011, said Jim D'Amato, the county's senior transportation planner.

"But there's two schools of thought," he said. "And they're not necessarily diametrically opposed.

"One is that what we should do with highway money is to fix congestion problems, improve capacity, widen roads - just use as much asphalt as we can to kind of help ourselves to improve traffic flow. And then there's another school of thought that says that type of thing is important, but there are other things that are important as well."

Improving the safety of traveling by bike and by foot, and linking land use with transportation, for instance, would inhibit sprawl, D'Amato said.

"So I think we're sort of seeing that debate here, which I think is very healthy for our community," he added.

The county expects retail businesses to continue to sprout up along Highway 9, and behind those commercial developments, more housing subdivisions. That confluence of homes and businesses is partly why SPATS would like to weave sidewalks and bike lanes into plans for the widened stretch of road.

The preliminary plans for widening Highway 9 represent "a perfect example of a 'complete street'," said Stephanie Wagner, land-use planning specialist with Upstate Forever's Spartanburg office.

Some people are uncomfortable committing to a prototype with bike lanes and sidewalks because it likely would add cost, Wagner said.

"But really when you're widening a road, that's just a minimal amount of extra asphalt that you're putting in," she added. "Why not accommodate them from the get-go? It's a lot cheaper to do it now, when we're already doing road projects like that, than down the road."

DOT Commissioner Hugh Atkins of Spartanburg said he liked all of the "complete street" features in the Highway 9 plans, "but I feel like it will be a long time before the road will get widened if we did the whole thing to that extent."

The delays, he said, would stem from the higher costs.

"The money that we've earmarked for it is not nearly enough to do it," Atkins said.

Funding that has been set aside for the widening project would cover about half of the costs, he said. Atkins said he has asked engineers to study what the additional costs of sidewalks and beautification

would be, and is awaiting those estimates.

"Everybody now wants the beautiful road with walking trails and that sort of thing," he said.

"I think most people want that, but we might study it and have to do some compromising in how far we go with it."

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