

# Sign fight pits safety against unique vista



KEN OSBURN / Staff

Northern Greenville County residents say the digital warning sign the state DOT is building here will block mountain vistas and should be moved closer to State 11.

## Wet roads can make U.S. 25 treacherous; residents fear DOT's solution will obstruct mountain views

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It's a tradeoff that pits driving safety against mountain scenery, and Greenville-Spartanburg's new representative on the state highway commission is coming down on the side of scenery.

Johnny Edwards, who was appointed to the South Carolina Transportation Commission earlier this year, said he wants the Department of Transportation to change its plans for an electronic sign along U.S. 25, and if it doesn't, he'll raise the issue at the commission's next meeting.

Edwards said he agrees with local residents who say the sign would obstruct mountain views if installed as planned.

"It's just going to be ugly, and I don't know how to put it any other way," Edwards said.

As planned by DOT, the sign would reach over the northbound lanes of U.S. 25 about two miles north of the intersection with State 11.

There it would be one of the few evidences of civilization along a stretch of highway that cuts through the area of northern Greenville County where the



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Blue Ridge Mountains meet the Piedmont.

Conservationists have long sought to protect the area's cliffs, waterfalls and hemlock groves, and there's virtually no development along U.S. 25 between State 11 and the North Carolina line, except for Cliffs Valley homes dotting the slopes and ridges.

DOT says the sign is needed to warn drivers of wet or icy road conditions along a mountainous route with steep declines and a high rate of accidents from hydroriplaning. Most crashes along the stretch occur when the pavement is wet, the agency says.

A group of northern Greenville County resi-

dents led by county Councilman Joe Dill, however, say the sign would block spectacular views of the Blue Ridge Escarpment if erected at the proposed location.

They want DOT to put it farther south, near the intersection with State 11, where they say drivers would have more options to change direction in case of poor highway conditions.

DOT agreed to shorten the sign arm after County Council adopted a resolution objecting to the proposed location. But so far the state agency has refused to change the location, saying that would put the warning to motorists too far from the danger area and reduce the sign's effectiveness in preventing accidents. Opponents aren't satis-

fied.

"If we're talking about saving lives and preserving the mountain view, then we need to move it back down to Highway 11," Dill said.

Bill Sharpe, a Cliffs Valley resident, said he collected 118 signatures on a petition asking DOT to temporarily stop work on the sign, which the agency did. Sharpe said residents of Marietta and Travelers Rest joined Cliffs Valley homeowners in signing the petition.

"None of us knew what was happening, or we would have been up in arms much earlier," he said. Edwards, the highway commissioner, said he's been talking to DOT's head engineer about the matter and hopes the agency will agree to the change. "If we can't bring it to

some kind of (resolution) that both sides like, then I'll bring it before the commission" at its next meeting Thursday, Edwards said.

Brett Harrelson, DOT's traffic safety engineer, said the sign would be part of a larger system that could detect precipitation and automatically drop the speed limit from 55 miles per hour to 45 miles per hour when conditions are slippery.

The system — which Harrelson said would be the first of its kind in South Carolina — includes a second sign near the North Carolina line for warning southbound motorists as well as speed limit signs with changeable numbers. Most of the cost — slightly more than \$1 million — is covered by an \$840,000 federal grant given to reduce fatalities on

rural highways.

Brad Wyche, executive director of the conservation group Upstate Forever, said he thinks DOT could improve safety and preserve mountain views at the same time by agreeing to a different location.

"The Blue Ridge Escarpment is a place of global significance with its stunning scenery and rich diversity of plant and animal life, amazing scenic vistas and countless waterfalls," Wyche said. "It's a true treasure that we have here in Greenville County and should not be desecrated with a nasty, flashing black sign."

Tom Corbin, who becomes the area's state representative in the South Carolina House in January, said wherever the sign ends up he wants DOT to paint it brown — like guard rails in the national forest — so it would better blend in with the natural environment.

"Our mountain area up there is so pretty, and it's such a great asset to our district and this area, we really don't want to have it gaudied up with a bad-looking sign like that, a huge sign," Corbin said.

State Sen. Phillip Shoopman of Blue Ridge said he also thinks DOT should move the sign. But Shoopman said the agency "has a significant level of autonomy in making decisions like this, and they've decided to go ahead."