

Fort Mill residents wary of bypass

Plans likely to include destruction of homes

By Charles D. Perry · & 2008 The Herald
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FORT MILL -- Whose homes
will be razed to make room for the Fort Mill southern bypass?

Residents will have to wait until January to find out.

York County engineers proposed a new route for the controversial bypass last week -- one that indicates five homes might be destroyed -- but they cautioned that nothing has been finalized and the latest plan is designed to affect as few neighbors as possible.

Still, residents in the Hensley Road area, where officials say most of the at-risk houses are, fear the bypass will claim their longtime homes.

"They're worried to death," said Billy Hensley, whose family has owned land on the corner of Legion and Hensley roads since the 19th century. "Some of these people have been here all their lives. Their families live around them."

The 4-mile bypass is intended to relieve congestion in downtown Fort Mill by connecting the existing Fort Mill Parkway southwest of Fort Mill with Springfield Parkway and S.C. 160 on Fort Mill's east side.

Plans spark controversy

Part of the county's 2003 "Pennies for Progress" road-building program, the bypass has been hampered by design problems and sparked controversy after bureaucratic errors forced the rerouting of the road around an expensive subdivision and through an area with existing homes, including Hensley Road.

In October, the subdivision's developer filed a lawsuit against the county and the town of Fort Mill over their handling of the bypass.

Kimbrell Fort Mill LP claims it didn't know about the bypass when it bought the land for the subdivision in 2005, according to the lawsuit, filed in federal court. The developer agreed to sell the subdivision to a builder that same year.

Fort Mill gave final approval to the subdivision, Kimbrell Crossing, in April 2006. But, according to the lawsuit, it wasn't until October of that year that county officials realized the bypass route went directly through the subdivision.

When the buyer learned of the problem, the company pulled out of the deal. County officials considered buying the land but said it would be too expensive, so they began redrawing the road around the subdivision.

That placed some houses in its path, infuriating residents such as Hensley.

"Nobody wants to touch (the subdivision) and take out the old homes," he said. "I can't understand the county wanting to take people's homes. ... I know (the Kimbrell Crossing) property may cost a little bit more. But

property versus homes -- that's a sad situation."

Kimbrell reached an agreement with another buyer in August 2007, but that deal was contingent upon the bypass not disrupting the subdivision, according to the lawsuit.

The latest design shows the bypass not affecting Kimbrell Crossing.

"Of course not," said Michael Smith, who lives on Hensley Road. "This is set out to get the houses that have been here and established for 50 or 60 years. ... They don't care. Simple as that."

Smith said he hasn't seen the latest route for the bypass, but the last one he looked at would have claimed the home of his wife's parents.

"They've been in that house for well over 50 years," he said. "How do they start again?"

Path unclear

But how many homes will be razed has yet to be determined, county engineer Phil Leazer said.

Early studies indicated that 11 homes might have to be destroyed, Leazer said, but recent research suggest that number could be reduced to five.

Leazer said he couldn't provide specific addresses for at-risk homes because so much can change when the county begins talking to residents.

For example, the county might plan to remove one house, but a homeowner across the street could be prepared to move, and his home could be razed instead of the one initially planned for destruction.

"It's those kinds of design changes that can make a huge difference," Leazer said.

Of the six routes county engineers studied, Leazer said, the recommended one is best in terms of overall cost efficiency as well as its impact on homes, wetlands and streams.

County Councilman Paul Lindemann, whose district includes the bypass, said he doubts Hensley's house will be affected by the bypass, although he said the longtime resident could lose some land.

"I think ultimately they'll be happy," he said. "If it takes off a couple acres ... I don't think that they're going to be hurt too bad."

But Hensley said he and his neighbors don't plan to passively accept what the county says.

"This is what they don't want to hear," he said. "We in this neighborhood have been together on this thing from day one as a group. We're not going to lay down and play dead. They're going to have to take property. (We're) not going to meet them at the door and sell out."

Before the County Council approves the route, the next step will be asking residents for their opinions about the design of the \$32.29 million road.

Officials said public meetings likely will be held in January, and area residents will be notified about them through the mail.

If everything goes as the county hopes, engineers project the first section of the bypass -- which will provide access to Fort Mill's fourth middle school -- will be completed in 2010.

For the entire project, officials said, the best case scenario would be completion in 2011 or 2012.

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