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DOT proposes changes to U.S. Highway 421

A plan on the table would create new overpasses while closing intersections at Hagan Stone Park and Harmont Road. The public has until January 16 to comment and ask questions.

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Citing safety concerns about traffic crossings on U.S. Highway 421, the North Carolina DOT plans to eliminate at-grade intersections south of the new I-85 bypass and north of N.C. Highway 62 by 2012 and build two new overpasses at Woody Mill Road and Neelley Road.

Under the plan, Woody Mill Road would be extended across Highway 421 to connect to Company Mill Road and would feature a full-diamond loop that would feed into north- and south-bound traffic on 421. Williams Dairy Road would be extended across the highway and connect to Neelley by way of a half-diamond interchange. Intersections in the highway that exist now, including those at Harmont Road and Hagan Stone Park Road, would close.

For Forest Oaks residents, the changes would mean accessing the neighborhood's main entrance on Liberty Road differently. "You're not going to go in and out the main entrance that you're used to" at Hagan Stone Park Road, says David Gearhart, who serves on FOCA's community development committee. When traveling south on 421, "you're going to have to go down to Woody Mill Road, which is the next left, which goes down in to Southeast High School."

But Gearhart thinks the new interchanges would be safer. "There have been a number of accidents up and down 421 at these intersections with people trying to duck in and out of 421," he says. "There've been several fatalities, even with the traffic light there" at Hagan Stone Park Road. "[The new interchanges] will make a safer access across 421."

The proposed new ramps also stand to lessen congestion on weekday mornings at Harmont Road, where cars line up five and six deep at the stop sign to get on 421.

The DOT unveiled its design for the Woody Mill interchange at a public hearing on Dec. 14. The proposal is part of a process that began in 1972, when U.S. 421 was relocated and reconstructed as a four-lane divided highway with the state gaining the right-of-way for future interchanges.

“When they build these four-lane highways, for safety, they only let you get on it at certain access points,” explains developer Sandy Weathersbee, who has 45 acres under contract on Woody Mill Road between Liberty Road and Highway 421. “If you live on Liberty Road, they can’t take that access away unless they buy that right from you.” Which is what the state did in 1972, when it designated what were intended to be temporary at-grade intersections at Woody Mill Road and N.C. 22.

With the proposed new access, “there will be a flyover, and there will also be access from that,” Gearhart explains. “It won’t be as large a ramp as at I-85. All the side streets that we presently have crossing 421 in the city limits to Highway 62 will be eliminated.” That’s all in preparation for a new road to the coast, Gearhart says. “They’re going to give 421 some status where they’ll up the speed limit and big trucks will be able to use the road.”

The changes could be good for commuters, but homeowners and others in the path of the new ramps will likely be bought out by the state.

“It appears from the maps that there is a road going to the extension of Williams Dairy,” Gearhart says. “It appears it’s going to be a flyover that will affect that property where River of Life Church is. How it’s going to affect it, we don’t know that.”

The changes, which are still years down the road, will be appropriate, Gearhart says, as more retailers eye the area.

“I think it’s going to be a good thing because as we provide basic services here -- not just in Forest Oaks, but in places like

Julian, Climax, Lynwood Lakes -- it will negate having to go into town as much as we're having to go into town now."

The public has until Jan. 16 -- which is a strict deadline -- to comment and ask questions about the proposal. Now is the time to inquire, although the changes will be a long time coming. "It's not going to happen in the next six months. It's probably five years down the road," Gearhart says. "Even though there are plans, there has not been appropriation of funds made yet. Normally, it's quite some time after the appropriation of funds that something is built."

So far, only the right-of-way taking for the Neelley Road interchange has been funded; the actual construction of that interchange has not been scheduled, which usually means it has not been funded.

Copies of the hearing maps detailing the location and design have been available for public review at the following locations. You're advised to call before visiting to make sure they're still there: (1) the Kirkman Municipal Building (Pleasant Garden Town Hall), 4920 Alliance Church Road, Pleasant Garden; (2) Melvin Municipal Office Building (City Hall), Greensboro Department of Transportation, 3rd Floor, 300 West Washington Street, Greensboro; and (3) NCDOT Division Office, 1584 Yanceyville Street, Greensboro.