

June 1, 2007

Highway 160 Update

Many of you have inquired about the status of the improvements to Highway 160. My family drives this road every day, so I share the frustration with the process up to this point. With (some) work now beginning, I thought it would be a good time for an update.

Like many of you, in the past I often got different answers to my questions about the 160 project depending on whom I asked. Now that I am in office, I was hoping to get some straight answers direct from SCDOT. Here is what they are telling me:

Background: The project is not a pure state project. It is primarily federally funded, with 80% of the money coming from Washington. It is administered by the Catawba Council of Governments (COG) which is a regional organization covering several counties. The COG receives about \$3 million of money for new projects each year, and it allocates that to various projects. If a project's costs exceeds \$3 million, the COG "saves up" the money until it has enough to complete the project. *This funding mechanism is important to remember when it comes to 160.*

Scope of Work: Because of the funding mechanism, the project has been broken down into 2 phases. **Phase 1** is essentially intersection work at 521 & 160. Hwy. 160 will be 5-laned from Possum Hollow Rd. to 521. There will be sidewalk, curb, gutter, and a "shared use" bicycle lane (essentially a wider lane) in either direction; there will be dual left-turn lanes at 521 heading north, a new through-lane, and a dedicated right-turn onto 521 heading south. On 521 North, there will be dual left-turn lanes onto 160. There will also be a landscaped median near Pleasant Hill UMC. **Phase 2** extends the 5-lanes, sidewalk, curb, gutter, and bicycle lanes from Possum Hollow to the industrial park. It also widens the road to 3 lanes (without sidewalk, curb or gutter, but with the bicycle lanes) from the industrial park to the bridge at the County line. *There are no plans for any improvements in York County.*

Status: **The recent activity near the 521 intersection is utility work for Phase 1. Water, sewer and power lines are being moved in anticipation of the road widening. This will take several months to complete. Although the final schedule has not been set, the new lanes may not be available for use until the end of this year, and the project may not be fully complete until Spring of 2008. The cost of Phase 1 is roughly \$3.1 million. All of that money is in hand. Phase 2 is another story. Because of the estimated cost of \$12 million, and because two other smaller projects are in front of it in the COG "line" (SC178 in Union, and SC55 in Clover), the money will not be on hand --- and construction is not scheduled to begin --- until 2012.**

Barberville Road Intersection: Anyone who drives 160 knows that this is the most dangerous section of road. Thankfully, SCDOT has noticed that as well, and the intersection has been identified as a critical need for safety improvements. This is important because it involves another --- and more readily available --- source of funds.

The current plan is to improve this intersection in late 2008 (although there were enough “ifs” and “buts” in the explanation that I expect 2009 to be more likely.) This will involve the installation of left-turn lanes on both 160 east and Barberville.

Summary: While I am glad to finally get the “official” position, and I know we are all happy to see the intersection work at 521 & 160 getting underway, the rest of the story is discouraging to say the least. Highway 160 is already overburdened, and the thought of waiting until at least 2012 for any relief is something nobody wants to contemplate. And, of course, the Barberville Road intersection is an acknowledged safety risk today; waiting until 2008 or 2009 won’t help improve that.

Recognizing that we are dealing with limited resources and a large government bureaucracy, I am hoping to focus my attention on little pieces of the problem one at a time. First and foremost, I would like to see the intersection at Barberville Road and 160 improved earlier. The intersection is both a significant safety hazard risk and a major inconvenience. Looking further down the road, I’d like to find a way to include improvements in York County up to the new bypass. It seems to me that improving 160 just to the county line simply pushes the current problems a little further west.

While I know this isn’t what anybody -- myself included -- wanted to hear, it is where we stand. I will keep you up to date on any important changes and, I hope, improvements.

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