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Advice sought on I-95 repairs

by Sara Hottman, Staff Writer

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Communications director Greer Beaty, consultant Craig Young, and engineers Derrick Lewis and Kristine O'Connor discuss ways to get people in Robeson County involved in the I-95 project.

LUMBERTON — The North Carolina Department of Transportation is looking to rehabilitate Interstate 95, but organizers are taking a new approach to the project: They want to hear from the people who use the highway most before they start planning changes.

“When people most impacted come together in the beginning and engage in the project, the end result is more reflective of what the community wants,” said Greer Beaty, communications director for the state Department of Transportation.

A Web site dedicated to the project, www.driving95.com, launched Thursday, providing an e-mail address and toll-free phone number that people can use to share their ideas for improvements along the I-95 corridor during the study period, which ends in fall 2011.

“The whole point is to generate some creative thinking from all parties involved,” said Craig Young, a planning engineer with Michael Baker Engineering Inc., a Cary consulting firm helping with the study. PBS&J, a Raleigh engineering firm, is also consulting on the project.

Currently the rehabilitation is in its infancy; planners don’t know what the project will entail or what it will cost, let alone how they’re going to pay for it — but they welcome ideas for financing.

Project organizers want support to be grassroots, and Beaty said the Department of

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Transportation communications office is ready to send representatives anywhere in the county to answer questions, hear ideas, and give presentations about the I-95 project. From civic clubs like Kiwanis to church gatherings to local government, any venue is fair game.

According to the department, during 2008, between 30,000 and 45,000 vehicles each day used the section of interstate that runs through Robeson County — the most traffic of any North Carolina county along the interstate.

Young said the project will include a Facebook page for people to more easily follow developments and contribute ideas. I-95 already has a Twitter account, http://twitter.com/NCDOT_I95, for people to follow.

“We’re trying to be proactive instead of reactive,” said Kristine O’Connor, the project’s planning engineer. “The process will help get people engaged and let them know that their issues are being addressed.”

O’Connor said the year-long study will take a comprehensive look at all 182 miles of I-95, and then the improvements identified in the study will be made gradually. Until this project, the department has concentrated on a single stretch of road from planning to completion rather than assessing the entire highway.

“Each project will have individual planning, but instead of having to reinvent the wheel every time we start a new project, we’ll have a base to work off of,” O’Connor said.

While organizers have not drawn up any specific plans, they know there will be safety improvements and roads will be widened to modern standards. Department records show there were 4,328 crashes along North Carolina’s I-95 between September 2006 and August 2009, and 1,207 of those were in Robeson County.

The highway was built from the 1950s to 1980s, and hasn’t undergone any full renovations since then.

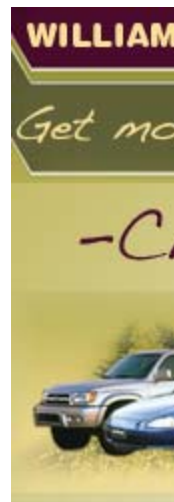
As a main thoroughfare along the eastern seaboard, millions of drivers use the 1,925-mile-long interstate daily. The highway starts in Maine, runs through New York City and Washington, D.C., all the way down to Florida; between those destinations are cities like Lumberton whose economies depend on the service industries that cater to travelers — hotels, restaurants, and gas stations.

“We’re very fortunate that we have such a vast transportation system here in North Carolina,” Beaty said. “(Interstate) 95 is a big part of that, and we need to make sure it can serve us well for another 50 years.”

Beginning in July, project organizers will hold public meetings in the I-95 counties. Meanwhile, they’re hoping their accessibility rallies support for and interest in the project.

“People will care about it more,” O’Connor said. “We want to make it what the people who drive on it want it to be. ... As public servants, our main goal is to serve the citizens of North Carolina.”

E-mail comments@driving95.com or call (877) 495-8439 to offer an idea or comment about the I-95 rehabilitation project.

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