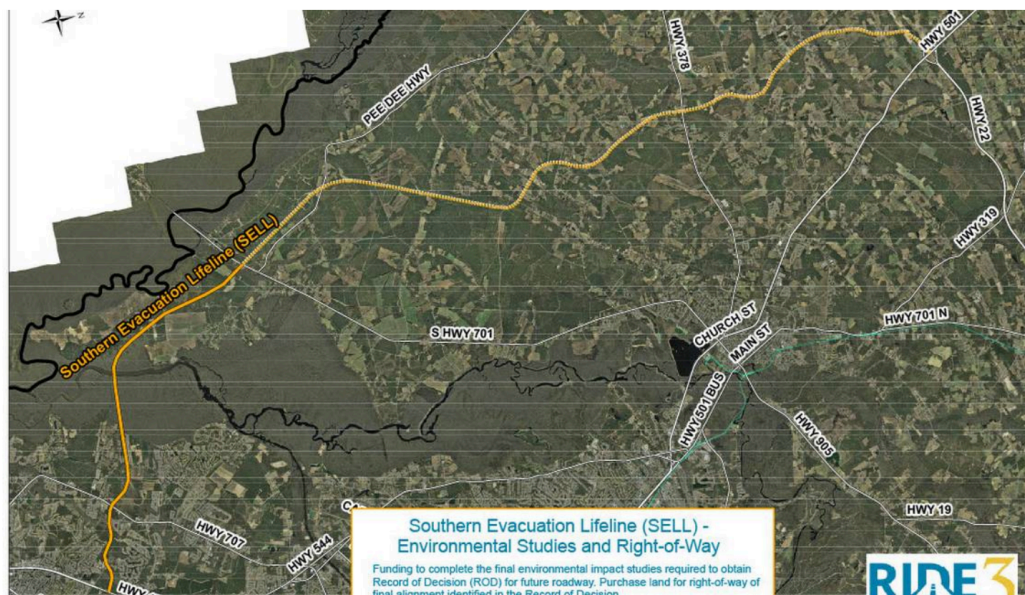


THE SUN NEWS



Does Horry County need a \$450M hurricane escape route? Expect it to be the talk of the summer

BY ADAM BENSON
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Horry County leaders are throwing their support behind a proposed \$450 million limited access highway to ease south end congestion during evacuations PROVIDED PROVIDED

Cad Holmes' connection to Horry County's Burgess community runs back more than 150 years. His uncle was five when president Abraham Lincoln abolished slavery in the summer of 1863.

Holmes, 78, spends some of his time clearing debris from graves in several local cemeteries where his descendants rest.

But he's worried.

"My family has paid their dues, and I can see the writing on the wall, what's happening," Holmes told the county council Feb. 21. "With all the flooding, the new roads coming in, displacement of people is bound to happen."

Political support is growing once again for a \$450 million hurricane escape route known as the Southern Evacuation Life Line — a proposed 28-mile limited access highway that would connect U.S. Highway 501 with U.S. Highway 17 with a crossing over the Waccamaw River and straight through Holmes' neighborhood.

The council on Tuesday unanimously backed a resolution urging completion of the project, with another long-time advocate telling The Sun News he's hoping state lawmakers will find merit in the plan as well.

And with \$25 million in RIDE 3 funding locked in to pay for land acquisition, right-of-way alignments and an environmental impact study as a prelude for permitting, the long stalled venture is again being openly discussed.

Construction still is still about eight to 10 years out if everything remains on track, but the study could be wrapped up by late summer.

“To me, it’s very, very critical that this road get funded and move forward, because right now the way it’s set up, southern Horry County has to evacuate through Georgetown County,” state Rep. Lee Hewitt, R-Murrells Inlet, said.

“As emergency officials are trying to get people out, adding Horry County and the growth that has taken place ... that’s just going to be a very monumental task, and it probably adds a day or two or three to the amount of time it takes to evacuate.”

Hewitt stood shoulder-to-shoulder with federal and state transportation leaders at a Surfside Beach press conference where members celebrated the launch of SELL’s first environmental impact study.

That was in 2008.

Since then the corridor known as SELL has been more of a pipe dream than a pipeline for traffic — in 2018, the Federal Highway Administration walked away from the project after spending \$4 million.

Now as a member of the SC House’s influential budget writing Ways and Means Committee, the Murrells Inlet Republican hopes to convince his colleagues that state aid for SELL is merited.

The RIDE III money can only be used within Horry County, but environmental impact studies along the entire corridor need to be finished before any dirt turns.

Hewitt pointed to the economic benefits of the corridor as well.

“The other thing this road can do is, if you look at the workforce that comes into Georgetown and even Horry County, a lot of it comes from western portions and so this will allow them a quicker route to get home,” he said.

While Gov. Henry McMaster has been vocal in his support for another massive Horry County road — the infamous Interstate 73 connector — he’s not publicly spoken on the need for a southern corridor here.

An inquiry to his chief spokesman, Brian Symmes, was not immediately returned. In a county with more landmass than Rhode Island but nearly half covered by wetlands, environmental groups including the Coastal Conservation League and Winyah Rivers Alliance are watching SELL closely.

“We want to remind you of the water coming out of your tap when you make decisions that deplete our natural filters,” Waccamaw Riverkeeper Cara Schildtknecht told the council on Feb. 21.

And in Burgess— where even plans to build a corner gas station sparks concern over more traffic and congestion — Holmes wants to ensure the county’s life line doesn’t come at the mortality of his rural neighborhood.

“We’re against this highway coming through. It’s going to devastate us,” he told the council. “These people came up through hard times, they’re not making \$100,000 a year, some of these folks are barely making \$20,000 a year or less than that, so these people are going to be hurting, and they’re going to be hurting real bad.”