

US 17 widening project preserves environment, improves safety

By Bob Kudelka

Drive along US 17 in the ACE Basin and right away you know the area is special.

The ACE Basin is where the Ashepoo, Combahee and Edisto rivers converge and flow past cypress swamps, historic plantation homes, old rice fields and tidal marshes.

It is one of the largest undeveloped estuaries on the East Coast. Wildlife in the area includes bald eagles, shortnosed sturgeon, loggerhead turtles and other threatened or endangered species.

Nearby the 9,800-acre Nemours Plantation, operated by the Nemours Wildlife Foundation, contains a rich diversity of habitats including remnant rice fields, fresh and brackish water marshes, upland pine and hardwood forests, bottomland hardwoods, and cypress/tupelo forests. The late Eugene duPont, III and family founded the Foundation in 1995.

So as work began on the US 17 widening project in this portion of Beaufort County this summer, SCDOT Project Manager Chris Hernandez said the uniqueness of the area makes it vital that the natural beauty is protected.

For instance, part of the 6-mile project will include a 100-foot median to preserve "very nice tree canopies," Hernandez said.

"We did a tremendous amount of tree surveys because this area has a large number of significant and specimen oak trees," Hernandez said. "We made a commitment to save as many of those as possible."

Along the route, engineers will be installing several guardrails and possibly tree wells, which stabilize trees and protect their root structure.

A paved jogging, walking and bike path will meander around preserved trees to provide a quality of life benefit for area residents. The path will allow enjoyment of the scenic area.

Silt fencing, which was already being installed on a hot morning in August, will protect the area marshland by providing erosion control, Hernandez said.

To allow animals to continue to migrate through the wetlands, two 100-foot flat slab bridges will be erected. These "critter crossings" will be used by snakes, deer, armadillos and alligators, he said.

"It will allow them to either swim or get to land and be able to walk," Hernandez said.

The long-awaited US 17 widening project is designed to improve safety on a stretch of highway from Gardens Corner to the Combahee River. The project became a priority for the SCDOT Commission after a series of fatal crashes.

Weston Newton, Chairman of Beaufort County Council and the Beaufort County Transportation Advisory Group said the widening of a deadly 6-mile stretch of US 17 has been a priority for Beaufort County for some time.

"Without the friendly cooperation of our partners at SCDOT, this project would still be in the discussion stage," Newton said.

"On behalf of Beaufort County Council and the Beaufort County Transportation Advisory Group, I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to SC Secretary of Transportation, H.B. "Buck" Limehouse, Jr. and the highway professionals at DOT for their commitment and for the spirit of teamwork they have demonstrated in our joint effort to provide safe roadways and to save lives in the Lowcountry," Newton said.

Wilson Elgin was SCDOT's project manager during the development of the environmental documents and permitting.

Elgin also spent time with some of the family members of crash victims, so it's especially satisfying for him to see work beginning.

"I think it's a worthwhile project because it addresses safety as well as the environmental concerns," Elgin said.

This stretch of US 17 had twice the fatality rate of portions of US 17 that were multi-lane divided highway and 1.5 the number of fatalities than other primary routes in South Carolina, Elgin said.

The agency coordination team included several state and federal agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, US Geological Survey, US Fish and Wildlife, US Department of Defense, and a local presence such as the ACE Basin Task Force.

"Probably 15 agencies met on a regular basis throughout the development of the EA (Environmental Assessment) and the permitting process," Elgin said.

Part of the widening will be to four lanes with a divided median.



SCDOT Project manager Chris Hernandez checks a survey stake at the future site of the paved pedestrian and bike path along the US 17 route being widened in Beaufort County.



Workers install silt fencing to protect the marshland by providing erosion control.

Other areas will have five lanes with the multipurpose path adjacent to the roadway.

The project is design/build to speed construction time. The project is to be completed in 2010.

Hernandez said the cooperation on state and local levels has been excellent.

"The response we've gotten from the community and Beaufort County and the City has been very good," Hernandez said. "Everybody's excited and ready to get it under way. Everything's been positive."

An on-site office was set up in Green Pond to house Hernandez and staff s from the various contractors including: HDR, project management; Phillips & Jordan, Inc., project and construction management contractor; Davis & Floyd, Inc., roadway and bridge design construction, construction engineering and utility coordinating, and surveying; S&ME, geotechnical engineering, quality control/assurance; Chao &



Work began in August on the widening of US 17 in Beaufort County. The project will improve safety while preserving the environment.

Associates, bridge peer reviews; PAN, Inc., right of way; Sprague & Sprague Consulting Engineers, Inc., signage, pavement markings, signalization and ITS de-

sign; Banks Construction, paving; Cape Romain Contractors, bridge construction; Buffington & Smith Contracting Co., cement stabilize base.

McTeer repairs completed 5 weeks early

SCDOT's emergency repairs to the J.E. McTeer Bridge on U.S. 21 in Beaufort were completed approximately five weeks ahead of the projected date of July 31.

SCDOT made the bridge available for traffic June 19, well before the Fourth of July holiday and the opening of the Beaufort Water Festival.

Secretary of Transportation H.B. "Buck" Limehouse Jr. cited the quick response to this emergency by the SCDOT staff led by District 6 DEA Robert Clark in the field with the support of State Highway Engineer Tony L. Chapman and Deputy State Highway Engineer Clem Watson, and the hurricane season as two factors that led to the accelerated repairs.

"Our staff both at Headquarters in Columbia, and our field



Traffic is back to normal now that repairs to the McTeer Bridge over the Beaufort River have been completed. The bridge was damaged by a barge back in April.

offices in the Lowcountry reacted immediately to assess this situation, and to move on an emergency contract to get the work started," Limehouse said. "SCDOT's

staff recognized that the McTeer Bridge is an important transportation link between Beaufort and the Sea Islands on a day-to-day basis, but it also serves as a vital

connection in hurricane evacuation, and we were on the brink of the hurricane season."

The McTeer Bridge was struck by a barge carrying a crane on April 26. The damage required replacement of all five beams in the bridge deck. However, SCDOT bridge inspectors determined that one lane of the structure could be safely used during peak traffic periods.

SCDOT worked with officials from Beaufort County, the City of Beaufort and the Town of Port Royal to reduce congestion as much as possible. Those efforts included the installation of traffic cameras at key points to allow the public to view the traffic situation in real time on the internet. In addition, SCDOT made provisions for EMS units to use the bridge at any time to respond to emergencies.

Limehouse said this repair project was also motivated by

SCDOT's commitment to the public.

"It's our job to provide a safe highway system for the people of South Carolina, and it's doubly important for us to respond as quickly as possible when bridges or highways are damaged, and traffic is disrupted," said Limehouse. He added, "We realize that lives depend on SCDOT getting these bridges and highways back in service, and we don't take that responsibility lightly."

Governor Mark Sanford was involved early on, communicating often with Secretary Limehouse and staying informed on the work schedule and progress.

The repair work was done primarily by United Contractors, Inc. This construction firm is a South Carolina business, headquartered in Great Falls. United has successfully handled a number of emergency repair contracts for SCDOT in recent years.