

I-565: The Huntsville Spur

Donna Crosby



A tale of public opposition, unique appraisal problems, and an unusual relocation situation in the face of exploding economic growth.

Early History

On October 24, 1968, the State of Alabama Highway Department requested Federal approval of the concept of a spur off of Interstate 65 into the City of Huntsville. And so it began.

The date was November 13, 1972. During the past 4 years, Highway Department personnel had been busy at work with location and environmental studies and were prepared (or so we thought) for the first public hearing on the Spur. Representatives of the Highway Department and the Federal Highway Administration were there to field a few questions from the citizens and to present to them an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) of about 50 or so pages. The law requiring environmental impact statements had passed in 1969, and the Federal Highway Administration had since been trying to establish regulations to be followed by State Highway Departments and were still in the process of so doing. They had accepted the EIS we had prepared, both of us knowing we had further noise studies to do and willing to admit to this.

So here we were with our 50-page EIS and our top Highway Department and FHWA officials ready to convince the citizens of Huntsville that I-565 was the best thing to come along since sliced bread.

Have you ever seen grown men in Brooks Brothers suits try to hide under the table?

These officials were ill-prepared to face what came before them. Approximately 500 to 600 people were present at the start of the public hearing. Most came to learn more about I-565 but were quickly swayed over to the opposition by a core group of less than 100 people calling themselves the Alabama Conservancy and bearing placards on tall supports declaring "STOP-I-565." They produced an extremely well-prepared, very detailed, and very embarrassing to us, EIS containing hundreds of pages. In addition, those of the group who wished to speak, presented resumes which qualified each as an expert in the area of the EIS on which he would speak. Most of

these people worked at NASA and were more familiar with the new environmental law than we were. They were very well-organized, with many well-prepared (and again, what proved to be very embarrassing) questions for the officials present. The people in attendance who remained in favor of the project were so intimidated by the opposition that they wouldn't even voice their support. The meeting lasted until 2:00 a.m.

Public Opposition

How could anyone be opposed to a 21-mile stretch of interstate connecting the City of Huntsville, including the Redstone Arsenal Complex, to the network of the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways; a highway that would provide high level highway traffic safety and service; a highway that would relieve traffic congestion on city streets and disperse traffic to desired destinations within the urban area; a highway that would decrease travel time for motorists traveling in this area of the state; a highway that would provide better movement of goods in Huntsville and from one point in Alabama to another; a highway that would permit quick ingress to and egress from the Civic Center and the downtown area; a highway that would provide improved access to the Huntsville-Madison County Airport; a highway that, studies showed, would produce a return of \$1.72 for each dollar invested in its construction.

Most of the opposition centered on the environmental and sociological impact of the project as well as the projected cost. Many local organizations expressed opposition: Huntsville Council on Human Re-



Old historic post office building in the town of Mooresville was within the required right of way.

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Grade and drain on new location where I-565 veered south of Alabama Highway 20 to avoid newly and heavily developed area in the town of Madison.



I-565 will run immediately in front of NASA's Space and Rocket Museum.

lations; People United to Save Humanity; Right of Life; Sierra Club; Huntsville Organized Tenants; Huntsville-Madison County Welfare Rights; Huntsville Branch NAACP; Alabama Conservancy, to name but a few. The two main groups were the Alabama Conservancy and the NAACP.

The proposed highway would displace hundreds of families and businesses. Many of the families were of low to moderate income and lived in substandard housing with a high percentage of them being renters and elderly. These organizations expressed concern for the social and economic welfare of these people.

NAACP

The NAACP claimed that the State of Alabama, the City of Huntsville, and the County of Madison had an unwritten policy of racial discrimination concerning poor and black people and that the expenditure of Title VI funds had been and continued to be spent to practice racial discrimination. However, blacks accounted for a relatively small percentage (18%) of the displaced on this project. Nevertheless, they were successful in stirring these people up, and together with the Alabama Conservancy were able to get the Director of Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) involved. In October, 1976, we were advised by the Acting Director of Civil Rights, DOT, that her office had reviewed the project from a Title VI standpoint and had determined that the proposed location of the Spur was not discriminatory and did not violate the 1974 Civil Rights Act.

However, in July, 1977, the newly appointed Director of Civil Rights, DOT, announced that the project was again being reviewed from a Title VI standpoint and requested certain information concerning the project. Thus began a lengthy involvement with this agency which resulted in the most comprehensive Relocation Plan ever developed by the Alabama Highway Department (door to door interviews prior to receiving design approval.)

Alabama Conservancy

The Alabama Conservancy felt that the project was not needed and the expenditure of millions of dollars on the Spur would be a waste of money and a venture that would prove uneconomical. This group expressed the loudest public outcry and involved every level and agency of government that would listen to them, all the way up to the President of the United States. They were given credit for spreading rumors about unfair treatment of people within the limits of the project by government agencies. At one point, the Conservancy filed a complaint in court objecting to the project saying that laws and regulations were not being followed. However, the U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals found the Alabama Highway Department in compliance with Federal Statutes.

Alabama Highway 20 is a four-lane highway which runs from I-65 near Mooresville into Huntsville. Plans called for the Spur to run parallel to Alabama 20 in some areas and to be superimposed on Alabama 20 in others. The Conservancy contended that Alabama 20 was sufficient for the needs of

the citizens and any funds available for transportation should be put into mass transit.

They never let up in their fight against the highway. As late as 1981, they were still running newspaper ads declaring that it was not too late to "STOP I-565" and claiming illegal actions on the part of the Alabama Highway Department. The ads also referred to the exorbitant cost of the project which had risen tremendously from the original estimate, saying that by the time the project was completed it would cost upwards of \$700,000,000.

Other Opposition

There was other opposition in addition to the organized groups. Several political leaders were opposed for many of the same reasons already mentioned and some political races were won or lost on this issue alone. Many citizens expressed their opposition in letters to the editor of the Huntsville newspaper, verbally attacking governmental officials and agencies and pro-political leaders. Many claimed that the urban portion would divide Huntsville in half physically, with the well-do-do on one side and the poor people on the other.

Support

While the storm of opposition was raging, there were many citizens and groups in support of the project but their voices were barely heard among the loud cries of the opposition. Many people felt that the highway would bring more progress to Huntsville, encouraging industrial development and aiding the economy by provid-