

What were the findings from the County's study of Johns Island Roads?

The ongoing public concern with the unsafe nature of Johns Island roads has generated significant controversy over how to fix them. After all, over the last few years there has been an average of 10 accidents per week on Johns Island roads. One segment of the community is convinced that the safety problem is caused by illegal speeding. They argue that if the Charleston County Sheriff assigned more deputies to patrol the roads, the problem would be solved. Another segment is convinced that the problems are the consequence of growing traffic volumes on out-of-date roads and the proximity of large roadside trees which provide no margin for error if a problem is encountered. This group believes that the solution is a new road built to modern standards. This would allow the traffic on the existing roads to return to lower, safer volume levels.

In late summer of 2009 in response to these calls to make Johns Island roads safer, Charleston County Council asked LPA, a South Carolina transportation engineering firm, to study possible ways to improve the roads on Johns Island. In directing the study team Charleston County staff emphasized their desire for a design like that of the Colonial Parkway in Virginia, in which the road is placed in a wide, park-like, landscaped, controlled access right-of way.

From November 2009 to May 2010, LPA studied a variety of different schemes for improving the roads on Johns Island, ranging from widening existing roads to locating and costing a new road down the center of the island. The study team reviewed the widening of three existing routes; 1)Main and Bohicket, 2)Maybank and Bohicket and 3)River Road. They also examined a large number of potential alignments for a new road and narrowed these down to four major alternatives. Each alternative was tried two ways--connecting to the proposed I-526 extension or connecting with Maybank Highway. In turn each was evaluated as either a free road or as a toll road. This generated a total of 19 different alternatives. LPA concluded that all 19 alternatives should be evaluated and presented to the Council

For each of these 19 alternatives LPA determined how their addition to the system would affect the traffic on other roads in the network, their cost to construct, their impact on the environment, and the social consequences to those households and businesses affected by the road. The level of service on each of the links in the system was shown graphically in a series of very useful colored maps produced by the CHATS computer model and presented in the report.

Their one-page conclusion of the results in the Executive Summary shows the characteristics and costs of each of the 19 alternatives in a single table. Unfortunately, the summary table was small in size, difficult to read, and confusing. Most important, it lacked a comparison of impacts that are important to Johns Islanders, such as the number of historic live oak trees that would be taken, the number of properties affected, the number of entry points along the route, the proportion of the road built as five-lane, uncontrolled access, the amount of tree canopy that would be sacrificed, etc.

Because information on these key impacts is available from various places in the final report, it possible to develop a summary of the major alternatives that is easier to understand, but more complete. This summary is shown in the following table.

Comparing the Three Major Alternatives

	Widening Main & Bohicket	Widening River Rd.	Building the Greenway
Cost of Construction and Right-of-Way	\$94 million	\$ 68 million	\$50 million
Traffic score for the overall network	104	87	114
Number of Grand Trees Cut	25-30	30-40	2
Number of Parcels Impacted	506	426	78
Residences, Business & Govt. Bldgs Relocated	20	40	13
Project Length (miles)	13.77	11.97	11.19
Amount that is 5-Lane Road (miles.)	10	4	0
Amount of Tree Canopy Disrupted (miles)	2.2	3	0
Farmlands (acres)	54.8	37.7	41.2
Wetlands (acres)	8.8	3.2	10.9
Floodplains (acres)	46.5	63.6	47.2
No. Left Turn Generating Access Points	200+	200+	5
Number of Cultural Sites Impacted	4	1	1
No. Hazardous Materials Sites Encountered	12	6	1

The report presents three recommendations for action by the County Council: 1) Ask BCDCOG to place the Greenway on the region’s long range transportation plan. 2) Explore a public/private partnership by issuing an RFP to possible private sector partners, and 3) Seek federal funding for possible short term safety improvements.

Some members of the Council apparently understood from the Summary Report that the LPA study indicated that the Greenway was the preferred solution ONLY if I-526 was completed. As a consequence, in September, the Council recorded 5 “no” votes to 4 “yes” on recommendations 1) and 2) and all the Council members present voted yes on item 3).

At about the same time the situation was complicated still further by SCDOT’s announcement that they had selected Alternative “G” as their final alignment for the I-526 extension. This alignment incorporated a lower-speed parkway-like design for the extension from its current terminus in West Ashley over the Stono River to two intersections on Johns Island, before re-crossing the Stono to James Island and joining the Connector to downtown Charleston. A debate over I-526 raged in the Post and Courier. This prompted Buck Limehouse, the SCDOT Secretary, to write a letter to the Council asking them to make clear whether the Council is going to complete the project, or not.

On October 19, 2010, Council member Victor Rawl presented a new alternative to SCDOT’s Alternative G, that deleted the segment between Johns Island and James Island and substituted the widening of River Road from Maybank Highway to Betsy

Kerrison Parkway. The Council voted 6 to 0 to ask SCDOT to examine this new alternative. It has now come to light that a reexamination by SCDOT will have to start from scratch. This would delay the project by 12 to 18 months and could cost up to another \$2 million. While widening River Road would serve the same purpose as the Sea Island Greenway, it would cost considerable more to build than the Greenway and result in significant disruption to residents, businesses, and to the beautiful tree-canopied and historic roadway.

In the meantime a solution to Johns Island's dangerous roads is no closer to resolution.