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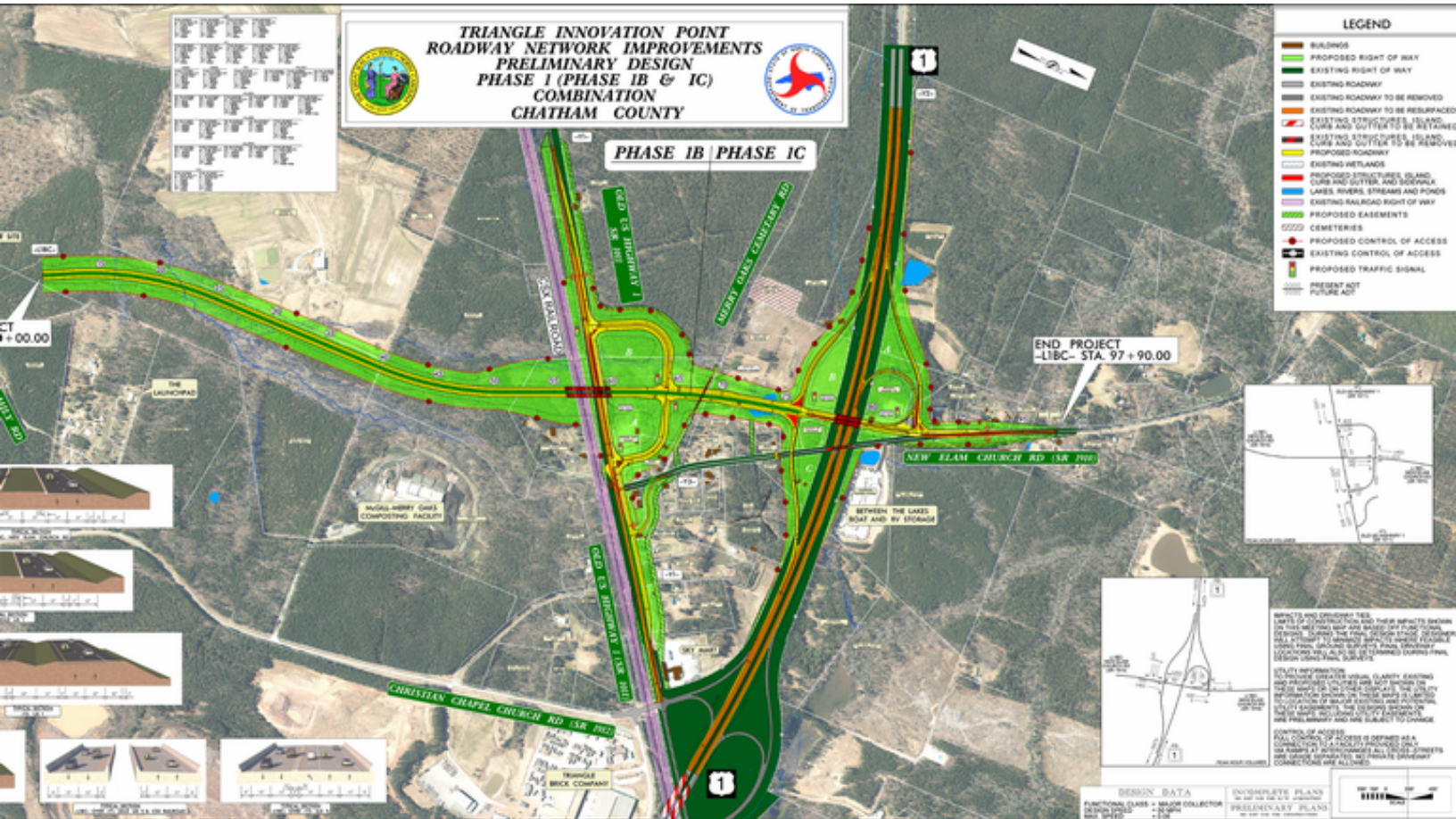
'I cried all weekend.' Chatham residents react to NCDOT plans for VinFast factory site

BY RICHARD STRADLING

UPDATED AUGUST 20, 2022 11:06 AM



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To ease access to the planned VinFast electric vehicle plant in Chatham County, the N.C. Department of Transportation wants to replace Exit 84 from U.S. 1 (bottom center) with a new interchange at New Elam Church Road, which would be relocated and extended over old U.S. 1 into the site (left). *NCDOT*



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PITTSBORO

They knew that the state had persuaded the Vietnamese automaker VinFast to build a massive factory in their corner of Chatham County. They knew the roads around the site would be changing; some had even seen surveyors or the wooden stakes they left behind.

But only in the last week did residents of Moncure and Merry Oaks see what the N.C. Department of Transportation plans to do in their communities.

More than 250 showed up to a meeting in Pittsboro on Tuesday to see large maps of the network of roads and highway interchanges [NCDOT says are needed to improve access](#) to the 2,150-acre site. Another 80 tuned in to a virtual meeting Thursday.

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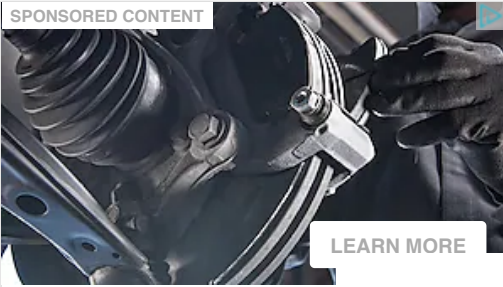
They studied the maps to see where the right of way for the new roads, shown in bright green, overlapped with their homes and land. Altogether, NCDOT estimates it will need to take 27 homes and five businesses and move Merry Oaks Baptist Church.

“They’re going to mess up a good home place,” said Lena Stone, who stands to lose four houses — hers and three rental properties where NCDOT plans to widen Pea Ridge Road. Stone has lived there since 1973, and the property has long been a family gathering place, said her daughter, Rhonda Mitchell.

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Like many who came to the Chatham County Agricultural and Conference Center on Tuesday, Mitchell said she had only learned of NCDOT’s plans a few days earlier.

“I was in shock. I cried all weekend,” she said. “It’s just going to change the whole community.”

Dhillon Singh Hardip learned about Tuesday’s meeting from a flyer someone posted in his Sky Mart convenience store at Exit 84 from U.S. 1. The maps show Hardip will lose all 20 of the gas pumps he installed in 2008. There’s room on the lot for new pumps, but it will mean demolishing and rebuilding the store.

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“I have to redo everything,” he said. “Totally everything. 100%.”

Hardip lives nearby and is invested both financially and emotionally in the area, where he owns several pieces of property. He feels like he has no choice but to rebuild.

“I love to go to work right there,” he said, gesturing toward his store on the NCDOT map.



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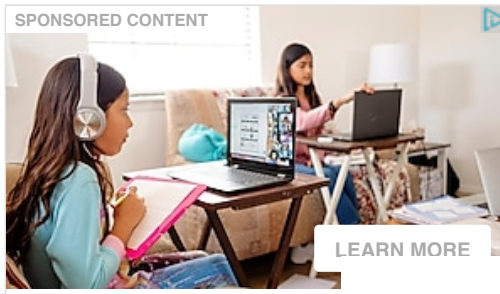
NCDOT SAYS IT'S ON A 'TIGHT SCHEDULE'

It often takes many years for NCDOT to plan big highway projects like this. But the timeline here is set by VinFast and the state's desire to see it [begin producing electric SUVs at the plant in 2024](#).

Chatham County and the state offered the company \$1.25 billion in tax and other incentives to locate here, including about \$250 million for road and rail improvements in and around the site.

NCDOT started its planning in March and quickly completed the surveys and environmental studies reflected in the preliminary plans it published for the first time late last week, said Colin Mellor, an environmental policy adviser for the department.

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“We’re not looking to surprise anybody,” Mellor said. “But it’s happening quickly because we’re on a tight schedule.”

NCDOT plans to begin buying right-of-way in September for the first phase. That includes relocating, widening and extending New Elam Church Road to the VinFast property and building a new interchange to replace existing Exit 84 at old U.S. 1. NCDOT hopes to start construction early next year.

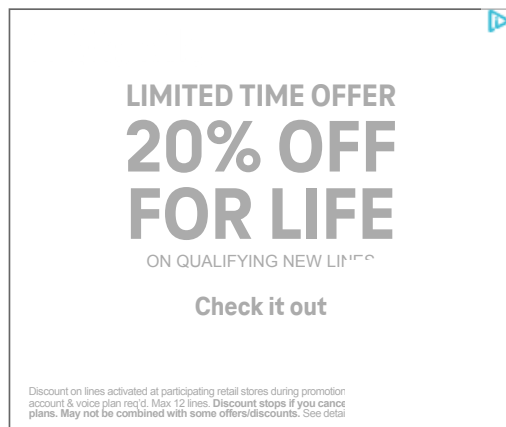
The second phase would create a new interchange at Exit 81 and turn two-lane Pea Ridge Road into a four-lane divided thoroughfare that also leads into the VinFast site. NCDOT says the timing of that work depends on VinFast meeting some of the job goals set by the state.



Members of the Sanderford family have lived off Pea Ridge Road for more than 70 years.

“They’re taking everything we got,” said Jack Sanderford Jr. after looking at the NCDOT maps Tuesday. That includes five acres, the houses where his mother and son live and his business, Logger Head Clearing and Grading.

Not only will the rerouted Pea Ridge come through their land, but so will a new access road to a FedEx distribution center that’s now under construction.



“I said to my wife, ‘If I can get on with FedEx, I could walk to work,’” Jack’s son Lewis said. “Not anymore.”

Lewis Sanderford said he had no idea where he will go, given the price of land and housing in the Triangle.

“I said could you leave me a piece so I could live there?” he said he asked an NCDOT representative. “And he said, ‘No, we need it all.’”

‘WE’VE NEVER HAD INPUT’

Those who aren’t bought out entirely may endure different hardships, as the VinFast plant, with its thousands of workers, opens in their quiet, rural community. The two new interchanges and access roads will help spur other development. It’s not likely that Hardip’s Sky Mart will remain the only retail business at the two interchanges.

Mellor said NCDOT will review public feedback on its preliminary plans but said he couldn’t say how much the department will be able to change in the months ahead.

Kay Hinsley doesn’t expect it will be much. Hinsley will lose 80 to 100 feet of her front yard along old U.S. 1, near Exit 84.

There’s a history of this in the family and the community, she says. Her grandmother’s farm was split in two by U.S. 1 in 1958. Hinsley is living on part of that land.

After the highway came the construction of Jordan Lake and Harris Lake, which also required families to give up their farms and their homes.

“I call it the shredding of our little corner of the county,” Hinsley said. “These are massive changes. We’ve never had input. It’s always after the fact.”

This story was originally published August 20, 2022 7:00 AM.

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Richard Stradling covers transportation for The News & Observer. Planes, trains and automobiles, plus ferries, bicycles, scooters and just plain walking. Also, hospitals during the coronavirus outbreak. He's been a reporter or editor for 35 years, including the last 23 at The N&O. 919-829-4739, rstradling@newsobserver.com.

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It's always fair market value, but the rub is determining fair market value. Both sides (DOT and the property owner) generally negotiate and potentially bring their own appraisals. If they can't agree it does to a judge.

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