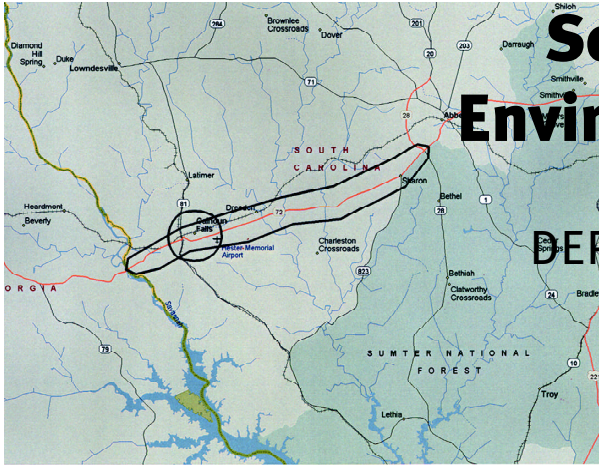




# **Community Impact Assessment and Public Involvement**



# South Carolina Route 72 Environmental Assessment

SOUTH CAROLINA  
DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

## Introduction

In 1921, the city fathers of Calhoun Falls approached the Abbeville County Highway Commission about paving the dirt road between the towns of Calhoun Falls and Abbeville. Their request was approved and construction began in 1922 on what is now SC 72. This small beginning became part of a larger plan by the Calhoun Highway Association to connect Atlanta, Georgia, with Raleigh, North Carolina. Construction began on the Georgia-Carolina Memorial Bridge over the Savannah River in spring 1926. It opened on Armistice Day, 1927. This bridge, located approximately 5 miles west of Calhoun Falls, linked Georgia with South Carolina.

Almost 80 years later, the South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT) is proposing to widen approximately 15.5 miles of two-lane SC 72 from the South Carolina side of Richard B. Russell Lake, an impoundment of the Savannah River, through Calhoun Falls to SC 28, west of the town of Abbeville, in Abbeville County. This project is also part of a larger two-State, long-range plan to provide a multilane highway between Athens, Georgia, and Charlotte, North Carolina, to help attract industry and promote economic development. Calhoun Falls is more than 60 miles from the nearest interstate highway. Upgrading GA 72/SC 72 to a multilane highway would improve access to Calhoun Falls and make it a more attractive location for manufacturing and distribution facilities. Additionally, operational costs would be relatively inexpensive, and markets in Atlanta, Columbia, and Charlotte would be only about 2 hours away by truck.



Existing 2-lane Savannah Street through Calhoun Falls.

At least one of the six proposed alignments for this project would cut through a minority community in Calhoun Falls known as Bucknelly. SCDOT and the consultants it hired to conduct an environmental assessment (EA) wanted to involve this neighborhood in decision-making process about these road improvements, but they were initially unsure of the best ways to generate and maintain community participation. This case study shows how transportation professionals and political leaders worked to build this involvement. A transportation-based revitalization in the small town of Calhoun Falls may now be possible because of this leadership.

## The Region and Community

Calhoun Falls, South Carolina, is located about 65 miles northwest of Augusta, Georgia, on the South Carolina/Georgia border. What is now Calhoun Falls was originally the eastern edge of Millwood, James E. Calhoun's plantation. The town began in 1891 with the coming of the railroads and grew with the dissolution of the Calhoun plantation in 1903. By 1907, Calhoun Falls was an incorporated town with a circular boundary that extended 1 mile from the intersection of Cox Avenue and Savannah Street, now SC 72. Cox Avenue began to develop as the commercial center of Calhoun Falls, while Savannah Street became the main thoroughfare connecting Calhoun Falls to Abbeville. In 1909, the town had its first industry, a cotton textile mill. Calhoun Mills became the town's largest employer and spawned the growth of several private cotton-ginning companies, a bank, and a hotel.

Most African Americans who moved from Millwood plantation into Calhoun Falls were former slaves or the children of former slaves. They settled in the southeastern portion of town in an area now known as Bucknelly. The area is located along the eastern side of one railroad and south of Seneca Street, which was one block south of Savannah Street. Middle-class whites lived along both sides of Savannah Street and for several blocks north of Savannah Street to the southern side of the mill village associated with Calhoun Mills. The mill was located along the

## Snapshot of Calhoun Falls Community

### Location:

Calhoun Falls, South Carolina, is a small town in a rural area near the South Carolina/Georgia border about 65 miles northwest of Augusta, Georgia, sits on the shores of Richard B. Russell Lake, an impoundment of the Savannah River.

**Population:** 2,328

### Racial composition:

- White - 52 percent
- African American - 47 percent
- Other - 1 percent

**Median household income:** \$17,414

**Poverty threshold for a family of four:** \$12,674

### Households earning less than \$15,000:

- White - 45 percent
- African American - 42 percent

### Economy:

Originally on the eastern edge of an old plantation, Calhoun Falls still has cotton-related industries as its major employers.

Source: 1990 U.S. Census

northern side of the other railroad and the mill village, which was populated by white residents only, and straddled the railroad.

African-American and white workers were forbidden by State law to work beside each other in the mill, so African Americans were generally relegated to working as either farmers or in menial jobs. During the early 1920s, Mr. Oscar Ellison, an African American raised in Calhoun Falls, began teaching African-American children in Bucknelly's one-room schoolhouse.

Much of what exists today in Calhoun Falls is a result of the growth that occurred during the 1950s and 1960s. Large areas north of Savannah Street were developed in the 1950s as Calhoun Mills and other businesses expanded. Since the 1960s, however, there has been little growth. Many of the

## Community Building: Oscar Ellison's Legacy to Calhoun Falls

In 1924, South Carolina passed a law ensuring all white children would have a minimum 7 months of schooling per year. While this law did not apply to African-American children, it did provide enough money for Calhoun Falls to build a four-room schoolhouse in Bucknelly for African-American children. Oscar Ellison became the principal of this new school and his wife became one of its first teachers. By 1925, enrollment at what had become known as the Ellison School had grown to 184 students from Calhoun Falls and its surrounding areas.

His school was also an institution for advancement of his community. In 1929, Mr. Ellison reached out to his community by adding agricultural classes for African-American farmers. While no subjects were taught beyond the 10th grade, Mr. Ellison tutored some African-American high school students so they could go on to college. South Carolina would not award its first high school diploma to African Americans until 1930. Although the school had no kitchen facilities, Mr. Ellison improvised a lunch program in 1935 during the depression by taking a wagon to the train depot to pick up surplus government food. One of the neighboring families agreed to cook meals for the school in exchange for the leftovers.

By 1941, the Ellison School had an enrollment of more than 300 students and a staff of three to four teachers. Mr. Ellison served as the Ellison Elementary School principal through 1959.



*I hope to leave a monument to my life when I pass on — a good school for my people in Calhoun Falls.*

Oscar Ellison, Sr.

stores and businesses on Cox Avenue and Savannah Street have closed, many of the older houses have been torn down, and the mill village south of the railroad no longer exists.

Local schools integrated in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As a result, new elementary and high schools were built in the northern portion of the town, and the Ellison School and its adjoining recreation areas were converted into the Ellison Community Center. These changes allowed African-American high school students to attend school in Calhoun Falls rather than be bussed to the county's only African-American high school in Abbeville. The only elementary school in the town, however, was sited more than 1.5 miles from Bucknelly. In addition, the town built a new sewage treatment plant and a local electric utility built a large new substation. Both facilities are located within the Bucknelly community. The residents usually refer to the sewage lagoons as "Lake Seneca."

Richard B. Russell Lake was created in the mid-1970s by damming the Savannah River. Hopes that the lake would attract tourists for recreation and outdoor sporting have not been realized. Similarly, the South Carolina Department of Commerce has been unsuccessful in its efforts to develop a second-home golf and lakeside community in the northwest portion of the town over the last decade.

Since the early 1990s, Calhoun Falls has had an African-American mayor and the town's population is now estimated to be more than 50 percent African American. For the most part Seneca Street remains a dividing line between the African American and white communities and the railroad has become the dividing line between middle-class Calhoun Falls and the mill village. The mill remains the town's largest employer with approximately 500 employees. Today, the population of the town of Calhoun Falls is approximately 2,500. It has the second largest population of any incorporated municipality in Abbeville County.

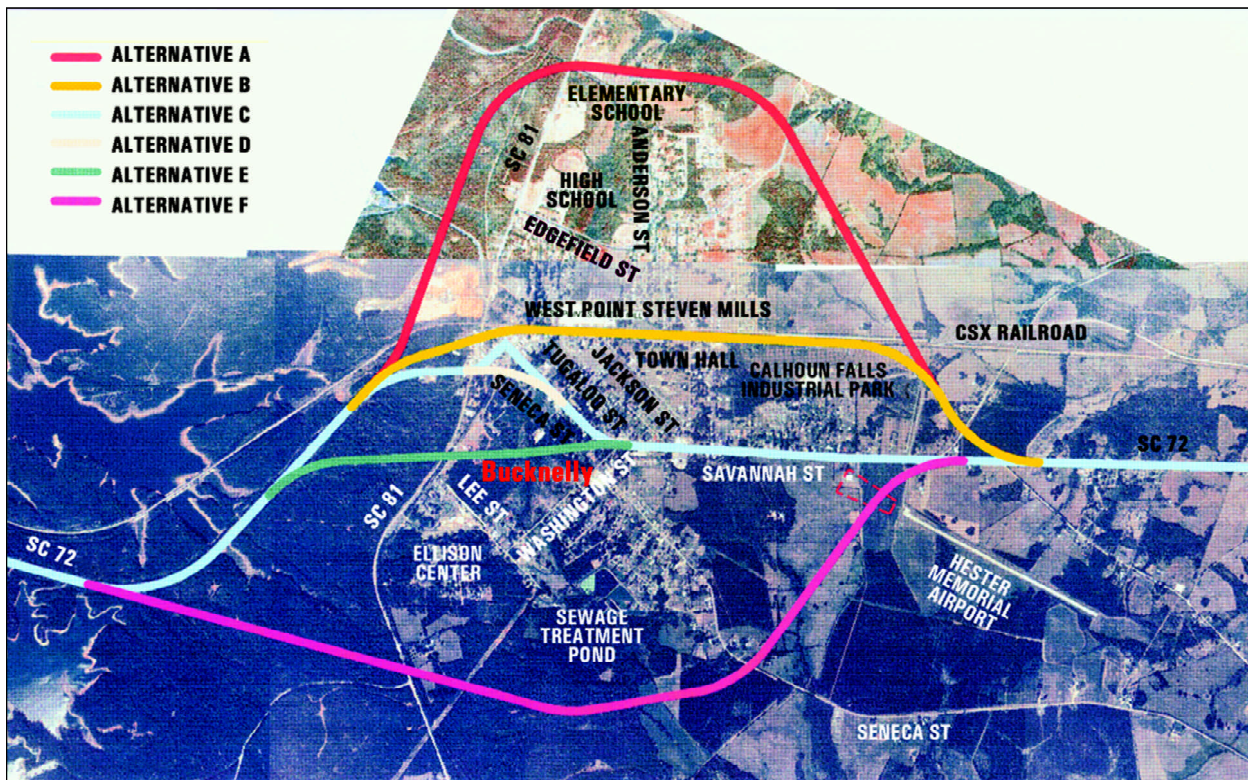
## What Happened

In 1999, the SCDOT selected a consultant to prepare an Environmental Assessment under the National Environmental Policy Act, for widening 15.5 miles of 2-lane SC 72 from Richard B. Russell Lake, the western terminus, to SC 28, the eastern terminus. Calhoun Falls is located approximately 3 miles east of the lake and approximately 10 miles west of SC 28.

In early October 1999, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the SCDOT project team held kickoff meetings in Calhoun Falls and in Abbeville with representatives of both Calhoun Falls and Abbeville County. The purpose of the meetings was to provide an overview of the EA process and a schedule for the project, to solicit input from the town and county as to their needs and concerns, and to identify the best way to involve the residents in the process.



Lee Street in Bucknelly west of the Ellison Community Center.



Six alternatives for SC 72 through and around Calhoun Falls were presented to residents at public involvement workshops.

## Project Chronology

### October 1999

First meeting held with FHWA, SCDOT and their consultant (the project team), and representatives of the town of Calhoun Falls and Abbeville County. Alternatives are defined and the public involvement process is discussed.

### October 1999

Consultant's field studies completed. Bucknelly community is identified and it is discovered that it will be divided by an alternative.

### January 2000

Second meeting held with the project team and representatives from the town of Calhoun Falls and Abbeville County. The disproportionately high and adverse impacts to African-American residents in the Bucknelly community are discussed frankly. The project team decides to show residents the six alternatives.

### February 2000

First series of workshops held in Calhoun Falls and Abbeville — only 11 African Americans are among the 156 residents who attend the workshops. These residents favor the yellow brick road and Abbeville County's purple southern bypass.

### February 2000

Project team decides to hold an additional meeting — in the Bucknelly community — to draw more local community attendance.

### April 2000

Bucknelly community meeting held and attended by 77 residents. Community favors the yellow brick road and does not want the community divided.

### April 2000

Project team decides to carry the yellow brick road and Abbeville County's purple southern bypass further. Detailed engineering undertaken for these two alternatives.

### June 2000

Second series of workshops held in Calhoun Falls at the town hall and at the Ellison Community Center. Yellow brick road is the overwhelming choice.

### June 2000

Project team recommends the yellow brick road as the EA's Preferred Alternative.

### September 2000

Public hearing planned to present findings.

While the town and the county wanted to improve SC 72 and agreed that the purpose of the project was to sustain and enhance economic development, they differed in how to accomplish this. The discussion began by presenting three alternatives for using some or all of the existing alignment of SC 72. Each alternative would affect residential and commercial structures along and/or off of SC 72. The mayor of Calhoun Falls agreed that it was important that SC 72 go through town, but he did not want to widen the existing roadway. He wanted the project not only to support the existing downtown and improve access to the mill, but also to maximize opportunities for increasing economic development at the town's existing industrial park and developing the second-home community. He suggested an alignment that would leave SC 72 west of SC 81, cross SC 81 at a

new location between SC 72 and the railroad, skirt the northern edge of the downtown core, run south of the mill along the railroad and pass through the existing industrial park before returning to SC 72 east of the town limits.

The Abbeville County representatives wanted to bypass Calhoun Falls completely and proposed a new alignment that would leave SC 72 west of SC 81, cross SC 81 at a new location, continue south of the town limits, and return to SC 72 east of the town limits. They felt a bypass could open large undeveloped areas for industrial development without slowing the flow of traffic.

Given the wide range of alternatives, the project team recognized that public involvement workshops were essential to engage residents in the process. While

project-specific web sites had been used successfully in other rural areas to advertise these workshops and keep residents current with the project, they were not feasible in this case because of limited computer ownership and access. Instead, the team decided that newsletters would be a more appropriate way to reach the residents with project information. The town offered to include the newsletters as part of the mailing of its monthly water bills and to put up posters prior to each workshop. Because illiteracy was a potential issue for some residents, packets of newsletters and posters would also be sent to both white and African-American ministers who would be asked to make announcements from their pulpits on the Sunday before the scheduled public involvement workshops. In addition, notices would appear in the two local newspapers, although illiteracy could minimize the value of this tool and readership was thought to be low in certain communities, thereby reducing the effectiveness of this tool.

In late October 1999, SCDOT's consultant conducted various field studies. Informal discussions with local residents provided crucial details for some of these studies. For example, during the week spent in the area, the project team ate breakfast at the Kuntry Kitchen, a small one-room, mom-and-pop eatery where millworkers stopped for coffee. The walls were filled with black and white photographs of Calhoun Falls in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. Noticing new faces, the owner told the project team the stories behind each photograph and said the photographer still lived on Savannah Street. For a day, the photographer drove around town with the project team's architectural historian helping to date the age of buildings and identify who had lived or worked there. Similarly, a discussion with a retired mill employee at a local hardware store gave the project team information about two cotton mill landfills that was not recorded anywhere else.

It was during this field trip that the project team identified the Bucknelly community. Bucknelly is an historically African-American neighborhood situated

## The Participants

- Federal Highway Administration, South Carolina Division
- South Carolina Department of Transportation
- Calhoun Falls Mayor and Town Council
- Calhoun Falls Chamber of Commerce
- Abbeville County Council
- Abbeville County Economic Development Board

along the eastern side of one of the town's railroads, and south of Seneca Street, which was one block south of Savannah Street. During this visit, the team realized that Bucknelly would be divided by one project alternative that widened existing SC 72 through town.

A second meeting was held in early January 2000 with representatives of Calhoun Falls and Abbeville County. The purpose of this meeting was to present the pros and cons of the six alternatives through and around Calhoun Falls; leave draft copies of the first newsletter for comments; and discuss the dates, places, and times for the first set of public involvement workshops. The six alternatives under consideration included a northern bypass, the mayor's alternative, three alternatives that used some or all of existing SC 72, and Abbeville County's southern bypass. Each alternative was discussed and the community-impact implications on Bucknelly were identified. It was decided that rather than eliminate any of the alternatives, the residents should be allowed to comment on all of the alternatives.

In order to attract residents from Calhoun Falls and those living between Calhoun Falls and Abbeville, it was decided that one workshop should be held in the western end of the project area (at the Calhoun Falls town hall), and one in the eastern end of the project area (at the Abbeville County Council chamber in the Opera House). Because Wednesday night is traditionally church night for some in the South, and

Friday night is the beginning of the weekend, Tuesday and Thursday were chosen for the workshops.

The workshops were carefully sited and scheduled to meet the needs of various populations. The workshop at town hall was held between 4:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. to accommodate elderly residents — who could visit and leave before dark — and two late shifts of workers from the nearby mill. The Abbeville workshop was held between 3:30 p.m. (again to accommodate the elderly) and 6:30 p.m. because the timing of mill shifts was less of an issue for Abbeville’s workforce. The County Council chamber in the Abbeville Opera House was chosen because it was a well-known landmark.

Notices and articles in local newspapers, on posters, and in the newsletters publicized the first series of public involvement workshops. The posters were hung in the windows of shops and businesses and in other high-traffic areas, including near the trash dumpsters at the regional pick-up sites where county residents brought their trash. As planned, packets of newsletters and posters were sent to local ministers. The newsletter centerfold showed the six alternatives superimposed on an aerial photograph of the town. A letter of the alphabet and a color identified each of the

alternatives. The mayor’s alternative was labeled Alternative B and shown in yellow. Following the first set of workshops, this alternative became known among the project team as “the yellow brick road.”

The town had originally proposed including the newsletter in its monthly water bills, but by January 2000, it had adopted a postcard format for the bills. Using the town’s water customer list and information obtained from the county tax assessor, the project team sent newsletters by first-class mail to 381 residents throughout the project area. The project team was able to refine its mailing list because the post office will return undeliverable first-class mail to the sender. Tax assessor information in Abbeville County was not computerized and could have been months out of date; ultimately, the project team had more faith in the water customer list because it was updated monthly.

At each workshop, residents were asked to sign in, received a comment sheet and newsletter, and were escorted to the displays. Members of the project team explained the displays and asked the residents to complete their comment sheets and return them during the workshop or by mail or fax. The Calhoun Falls workshop in was attended by 118 residents, 11 of whom were African American. Forty-seven comment sheets were returned. The yellow brick road was the preferred choice, with the Abbeville County’s purple southern bypass a distant second. Many of the white residents living along existing SC 72 had placed stakes in their yards marking the proposed right-of-way. These residents attended the workshop as an organized group and were vocal about not wanting existing SC 72 widened through town. Only one resident opposed the alternative that would have divided the Bucknelly community.

No African Americans were among the 38 residents attending the workshop in Abbeville. The majority of these residents came because they were interested in an adjacent SCDOT project. As a result, only two residents returned comment sheets.



The Mayor of Calhoun Falls’ suggested alignment, the yellow brick road, would widen Abbeville Street between the mill and the Northside Baptist Church.



After the workshops, the project team decided that another way had to be found to engage the Bucknelly community. It was also decided that no further workshops needed to be held in Abbeville. The project team felt that it was important to actively involve the Bucknelly community because some of the proposed alternatives would generate disproportionately high and adverse effects upon its predominantly minority population. No one knew why so few African Americans attended the workshop. This question was not to be answered until a community meeting was held in Bucknelly.

In an attempt to obtain input, the project team decided to invite only the members of the Bucknelly community to a meeting at the Ellison Community Center. This meeting was scheduled from 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. the day after Easter Sunday. It was hoped that announcing the meeting from pulpits when churches would be full would increase attendance at a workshop held the very next day.

The project team used the town's water customer list and a list of the streets within the Bucknelly community to identify 209 residents. Bucknelly residents were sent a first-class letter signed by the mayor inviting them to attend the community meeting and stressing the importance of their participation. Approximately 10 percent of these letters were returned by the post office to the mayor's office as undeliverable. The mayor took the letters to the water authority and asked that addresses be checked against the customer list. They were found to be the same. Rather than re-mail the letters, the mayor hand delivered them to the Bucknelly residents. In addition, copies of the mayor's letter and copies of the first newsletter were sent to ministers at each of the four African-American churches in Calhoun Falls. On Easter Sunday, each of the ministers announced the Bucknelly community meeting from their pulpits.

Seventy-seven Bucknelly residents attended the community meeting at the Ellison Community Center, including, Henry Ellison, the youngest son of Oscar Ellison, for whom the Ellison School and later



Bucknelly residents came out in greater numbers for a workshop held at the nearby Ellison Community Center.

Community Center were named. While neither Mr. Ellison nor any of his family still live in Calhoun Falls, he returns to Bucknelly for special occasions. He was in town to award educational scholarships funded by the Ellison Foundation. Mr. Ellison was one of the first to arrive at the meeting and the last to leave. For most of the evening, he stood off to the side of the displays. As members of the community arrived, they sought him out to pay their respects. While he was an absentee patriarch, it was obvious that those middle aged and older held him in high esteem. Before the meeting, Mr. Ellison and the mayor had gone door to door urging the residents to attend the meeting.

In addition to the 77 Bucknelly residents, 4 white residents attended the community meeting "just to see if what the Bucknelly residents were being shown was different than what they had been shown at the earlier Calhoun Falls meeting." Forty comment sheets were returned. Project team members took special care to assist Bucknelly residents who had "left their glasses at home" by offering to write down their comments after they had been shown the displays on various alternatives. A tape recorder was also available to take oral comments, but there were none.

The Bucknelly community overwhelmingly preferred the yellow brick road alternative and did not want the community divided. After the Bucknelly meeting, the project team decided to drop four of the alternatives. Only the yellow brick road and Abbeville County's purple southern bypass alternatives were to be carried forward and studied in more detail.

More detailed engineering was undertaken during May and June 2000, the second newsletter was

prepared and sent by first-class mail to 713 residents, and the second series of workshops was scheduled. The project team decided to hold workshops at both the Calhoun Falls town hall and the Ellison Community Center on a June afternoon and evening between 4:00 and 9:00 p.m. This was an opportunity for all communities to visit both locations if they chose and to see that the same information was presented at both locations.

## The “Disproportionately High and Adverse Effects” Test — Recognizing Cumulative Effects

How does a transportation practitioner determine if a project or proposal is going to have “disproportionately high and adverse effects” on a low-income population or minority population? Adverse effects are all significant individual or cumulative health or environmental effects, including interrelated social and economic effects. If such effects are predominantly borne by a minority population or low-income population, or if those populations would suffer greater or more severe impacts than others, then the effects are disproportionate (for complete definitions, see DOT Order 5610.2 and FHWA Order 6640.23).

The public involvement process can be a revealing means for understanding how community perceptions, including mistrust of government, are shaped by a cumulative pattern of past public investments and facility sitings. It was not until one of the Bucknelly residents mailed in comments did the project team begin to understand the reluctance of the African American community to participate more fully in the process:

*I strongly suspect, as I write you my comments concerning the various proposed routings of a four lane S.C. Hwy 72 thru the Calhoun Falls area, that you have already made your decision, and were just going thru the motions of giving the African-American community the illusion of thinking our input is being seriously considered, thus satisfying laws mandated by the federal*

*government. Forgive me if I am skeptical, but in the past, we were never given the opportunity to give our input to something of this magnitude. The Ellison Center where the meeting was held, is where I attended elementary school. I was in the first grade when the historically precedent setting, Brown vs. Board of Education was passed (1952/53) by the U.S. Supreme Court, making it unconstitutional and against the law to have separate schools for the races. This law of the land was not enforced in our town until 1970. This caused me to be bussed from the 8th grade thru 12th grade 15 miles to Abbeville to the only Colored high school in the county, at the time, while passing the white high school that was only one mile from my home. So you see I am very skeptical for a myriad of reasons when it comes to we African-Americans being seriously considered in the decision making process. Currently as I write, the cesspool/waste treatment center for the town of Calhoun Falls sits right in the middle of OUR African-American residential community, NOT in the middle of the white community. We also had several meetings about this, and it still remains there. So I am sure you get my drift. However, the fact that you even went thru the motions to hear what we had to say, be it a sham or not, is in itself a milestone to us. Therefore, just in case you are seriously considering our comments this is what I have to say . . .*

The post office returned 47 newsletters as undeliverable. These included ones sent to a street address when the resident had a post office box, or vice versa. The postmaster was kind enough to write the post office box number or street address on the returned newsletter so that the mailing list could be corrected and the newsletter remailed. At the second set of workshops, the residents were asked if they had a street address and a post office box. When names or addresses were illegible, web sites such as [www.anywho.com](http://www.anywho.com) were used to link names and addresses, but this only worked if the resident had telephone service.

Seventy-one African-American Bucknelly residents and six white residents from other parts of town attended the Bucknelly workshop. They returned 53 comment sheets. The workshop at town hall was attended by 68 residents, including 8 African Americans, and 19 comment sheets were returned. The residents at both workshops overwhelmingly wanted the yellow brick road because of what it could do for the town.

While the yellow brick road has adverse effects for some commercial businesses, it also presents an opportunity to address some areas in need of redevelopment. Study of the detailed engineering drawings had shown that the yellow brick road would affect 17 buildings on the northern edge of the downtown and 2 mobile homes. Almost half of buildings were vacant and the mobile homes could be moved. Because of the available vacant parcels in the downtown and the compensation that the owners would receive, it was believed that many of these owners would rebuild. One building involved was the town's garage for its garbage trucks. This building was in poor condition and would be replaced through the FHWA's Functional Replacement Program. The yellow brick road also changed the circulation within the downtown. This change would provide better access and improve emergency response time for the police and fire departments. As part of the design, the existing substandard railroad crossing at the mill would be upgraded and signalized, and both the mill



Buildings that will be taken by the new SC 72/SC 81 intersection west of downtown Calhoun Falls.

and the town's existing industrial park would enjoy front-door, five-lane accessibility.

Following the second series of workshops, the project team met and decided that the yellow brick road should be the Environmental Assessment's preferred alternative.

## Effective Environmental Justice Practices

This case study illustrates several effective practices related to community impact assessment and public involvement. Project team members left their offices and made several field visits to the study area and Calhoun Falls. The project team did what transportation professionals should do to *learn* about a community:

- **Walk Around.** By experiencing the community on a human scale, the project team was able to clearly identify the Bucknelly community and examine firsthand the potential effects of alternative alignments for SC 72.
- **Learn the History.** The African-American community in Bucknelly had a deep history, one

## The “Disproportionately High and Adverse Effects” Test — More than a Desktop Exercise

The evaluation of disproportionately high and adverse impacts often begins at the planner’s desk as a conventional analytical exercise using existing maps, aerial photographs, census, and other data. Combining this “desktop” data, some project impacts can be screened in advance. For example, some alternatives would require the taking of more houses in minority neighborhoods, while others would require the elimination of more open space.

The map, however, is not the territory. No area can be completely understood on the basis of maps and secondary data sets alone. Only when the SC 72 project team made field visits to Calhoun Falls did they begin to recognize the true impacts of the alternative alignments. The project team did what transportation professionals *should* do to learn about a community.

### **Making Choices: Do the Right Thing!**

At any stage in the project development process, the transportation practitioner may be confronted with evidence that a program, policy, or activity that they are involved in has disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects on a low-income or minority population. Further, they may discover that their project’s adverse effects occur in a community already burdened with a disproportionate share of facilities that generate adverse human health or environmental effects. It’s possible the practitioner may discover a pattern of such disparate effects or, even, discriminatory practices. For many transportation practitioners, such discoveries are uncomfortable; they fall outside the traditional concerns of a profession focused upon technical accuracy and analytical excellence. Still, the Calhoun Falls case offers some pointers about how to confront this dilemma and accept a call to personal responsibility:

- *Commit to Effective Public Involvement.* Budgeting for, and carrying out field visits and other local information gathering efforts is an important first step. Project budget constraints can press project

managers or funders into taking shortcuts that reduce outreach efforts. However, allocating resources for these activities up-front can actually save money in the long run as problems are discovered and addressed.

- *Listen to Your Instincts.* The SC 72 project team leader was dismayed that so few African Americans turned out for the first community workshop. She reasoned, correctly, that a special outreach effort would more effectively draw Bucknelly residents into the decision-making process.
- *Promote Technical Approaches Sensitive to Community Input.* The preferred alignment for SC 72, “the yellow brick road,” was developed by local leaders — not the project team. After talking to leaders and the community residents, however, the project team saw the wisdom of the alignment and recognized that its impacts were actually smaller than those of other alignments that took fewer existing buildings. Simply put, on the issues that mattered, the alignment fit more harmoniously into the community.
- *The “Disproportionately High and Adverse Effects” Test is NOT the Sole Criterion for Addressing Community Impacts.* Avoidance, minimization, and mitigation strategies are often used by the FHWA and its partners, even when the effects of a project are not considered significant. By attending even to apparently small impacts, project teams enhance community acceptance and promote context-sensitive solutions.
- *Go the Extra Mile.* Transportation projects are produced in a group setting, with many people sharing different responsibilities. When a professional identifies a potential environmental justice issue, it may be difficult to successfully bring it to the attention of the rest of the project team. Don’t be deterred by this difficulty. Doing the right thing may not be easy, but it will result in better, more just, and more broadly supported transportation projects. And that should be everyone’s professional goal.

often clouded by discrimination and disenfranchisement. The project team heard about some of these past problems firsthand. The team's visit to Calhoun Falls revealed a positive history as well, such as the importance of the Ellison School/Community Center and the role of the Ellison family as community leaders. Knowing these crucial facts helped the project team build successful community outreach and overcome initial community skepticism.

- **Tailor Public Involvement to Unique Local Needs.** With the help and encouragement of local officials, the project team ensured that community outreach efforts were targeted and accessible to everyone who might be affected by the project. The team made a particular point of making and maintaining contact with the Bucknelly community residents. Expanding upon traditional outreach efforts such as newsletters and workshops, the team took account of Bucknelly's unique needs and made sure that all residents were informed of the highway project. The team reached out to the community through the churches, took account of local problems such as illiteracy, and took advantage of the involvement of community leaders to encourage broad-based participation. Even the normally simple task of developing and maintaining a project mailing list was given extra scrutiny to ensure that the needs of Calhoun Falls' African-American community were being met.
- **Listen to Everyone's Story.** Communication with local officials, the general public, and the African-American residents of Bucknelly all helped the project team to better understand local needs. This successful outreach led directly to identifying a highway alignment that was widely approved by the public.
- **Let the Community Describe Its "Disproportionately High and Adverse Effects."** By listening to Bucknelly residents,

project team members were able to learn about past "adverse impacts" on the minority population, like the siting of the town's wastewater treatment plant. This context was crucial for evaluating the direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of the highway proposal on the Bucknelly community.

## Challenges Ahead

As this case study is written, the Environmental Assessment for the SC 72 improvement project is not yet complete. To fulfill the promise of their efforts so far, SCDOT and the project team must continue to reach out to and involve the Bucknelly community in project decision making. Efforts similar to those already undertaken will be necessary throughout the environmental review process. The ultimate design and construction of the improved roadway will also require extensive and inclusive public involvement. Those who worked on these early phases of the project must find ways to communicate their experiences and successes to those responsible for final design and construction of the roadway.

The case study also demonstrates how the perception (and reality) of past discrimination can affect public participation in a planning process. The Bucknelly community felt that it had been the town's dumping ground in the past, and residents were therefore quite skeptical of the project team's initial outreach efforts. Only a persistent and consistent pattern of contact and communication can overcome such past discrimination.

## Lessons Learned

This case study has important implications for any transportation professional interested in improving the quality and value of public outreach in the transportation planning process.

- Begin to coordinate with local community representatives immediately and continue

## Benefits of Environmental Justice in Decision Making

### For the Public:

- The public developed a deeper understanding of, and support for transportation improvements in and around Calhoun Falls that they believed fit more harmoniously into the community.
- African-American residents from the Bucknelly community were encouraged to increase their involvement in the community impact assessment and transportation decision-making process.
- The project raised expectations among residents of the Bucknelly community for future consultation and consent on public works projects.

### For the Agency:

- The approach improved communication between SCDOT and its constituents. Because of its outreach to the Bucknelly community, the project team developed a more complete understanding of the impacts of the various alternatives. Contact with local residents provided crucial pieces of information that improved the quality of the environmental assessment and informed the decision-making process.
- The preferred alternative was understood and supported by a strong majority of the community, including people whose voices had seldom been heard in prior decision-making efforts.

throughout the entire process. It is important to talk with these representatives on a frequent basis, even when there may be nothing new to tell, because they are the lifelines into the community.

- Good public involvement occurs on front porches, in living rooms, and under clotheslines. Planners must get out of the office and interact with the community, otherwise, there will be no public involvement.
- Understand that some residents of minority or low-income communities probably will not trust officials or planners immediately and, in some cases, there

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*Establishing workshops, publicizing articles, involving churches, advertising in businesses, and making house-to-house visits were all skillful tactics for involvement. I learned that going the extra mile, establishing relationships, and having a determination for active participation will bring positive results.*

– Johnnie Waller  
Calhoun Falls Mayor

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may never be trust. This should not diminish the dedication of the effort or the goal to be reached.

- Be willing to try anything when it comes to reaching the target audience. Use the web, public service announcements, the public broadcasting system, and newsletters or flyers. Put posters where people gather — grocery stores, trash dumpsters, bait shops, hardware store, banks, places of employment, restaurants, gas stations, schools, theaters, churches. Feed information to the local newspaper for articles, make project representatives available to them, and ensure that media know the time and location of public involvement meetings. Send mail by first-class rather than by bulk-rate permit so that mailings lists can be monitored and updated. Send information packets to the local ministers so they can make announcements from their pulpits. Because some in the target audience may be illiterate or not speak English, find ways to help them participate that will not embarrass them. For example, color-code the alternatives rather than labeling them just by name or letter. Listen to residents' responses to questions, and repeat their concerns back to them so they will know that their concerns have been heard. Visit places where community members spend time (hardware store, barbershop, gas station) and talk to them there. Pay particular attention to the obvious — what is seen — as well as what should be seen.

## References

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