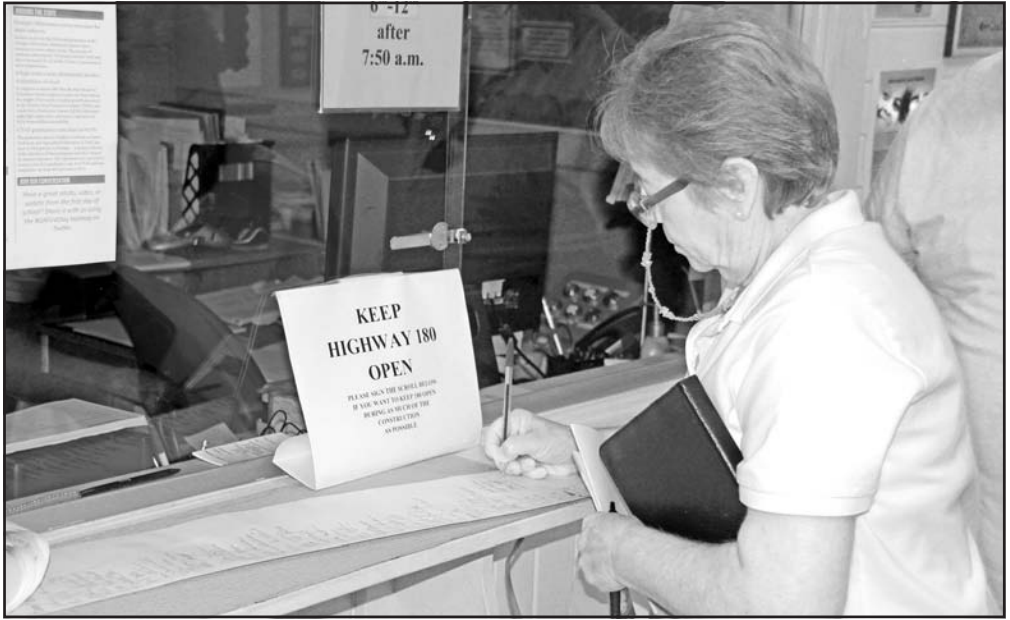


180...from Page 1A



Dianne Wood of Wolf Pen Gap Road signs a petition at Woody Gap School to keep SR 180 open to through traffic during construction. Wood has grandkids in Blairsville, and babysitting them would be complicated if the road were closed. Photo/Shawn Jarrard

residents and interested parties made their way into the school, a petition to keep SR 180 open greeted them – the petition had been collecting signatures at the Wolf Pen Gap Country Store ahead of the meeting.

And once people made their way into the auditorium, they were greeted with big signboards containing plans for the detour and others that explained the project.

Unfortunately, GDOT was not there to give any presentations or to answer any questions regarding alternate scenarios – GDOT representatives were there to inform people about the specifics of the detour and current plans, not to address the specific consequences of the closure.

Enter Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, District 51 State Sen. Steve Gooch and House District 8 State Rep. Stephen Allison.

After seeing the confusion and anxiety building around the room, these three elected officials decided to give an impromptu presentation on what attendees needed to do next.

“The one thing that we have to stress is, what you say tonight is not what’s important – what you write down on paper tonight is what’s important,” said Commissioner Paris. “No matter how upset you are, and no matter how mad you are about what may or may not happen, if you don’t get it on paper, it is no good.”

Rep. Allison also weighed in on the issue, giving those gathered a little insight into how the process worked.

“I cannot stress enough that, everything you want to say to us, we’re willing to listen, we’re here,” said Rep. Allison. “This is our role as public officials. But whenever you deal with a state agency

who then has to deal with a federal agency, we need your written input.

“So everything you’re telling us – I’m concerned about the kids going over the mountain, we have people that need medical treatment, I’m worried about my business interests – all of those things we need you to put on a comment card, we need you to put into a letter, and we need you to send to the DOT to give them ammunition to work with these other agencies.”

Sen. Gooch was also optimistic about the chances of alternate plans – as long as people left public comment with reasons why it was necessary.

“I think what you’re seeing here tonight is a preliminary plan that was put together by consultants and some engineers that were hired by the Department of Transportation,” said Sen. Gooch. “This is a very long process. You’re not going to see bulldozers out here next week.”

“At this point in the game we’re in the early planning stages. Now’s the time, as you’ve already heard, to voice your concerns and your opinions. All of us have looked at it and feel the same way you do, that closing Highway 180 is not feasible. Not for this community, and it’s not good for all of us – there’s a lot of people in here that have to go back and forth to Blairsville every day for school, for work, for doctor appointments.

“But that’s something that we’ll have to consider, and that’s something I’m willing to support if it keeps the road open so you all can go back and forth to Blairsville to do your business. Emergency services have to be considered. Fire and police, EMS, all those things have to be factored into it. Those are the things you need to put on your cards.

“All the comments that have already been told to us personally, make sure you write that down, because this information is going to be printed up in a report, and it will go back to the DOT here in Atlanta, in Washington, and it will also go to the National Forest Service.”

Construction for this project is not supposed to start until at least 2019, according to GDOT District One Communications Officer Katie Strickland, though there is a much more important deadline coming up.

Suches and county residents, as well as any other interested parties, will have until Thursday, Sept. 8, to provide public comment on the detour and project.

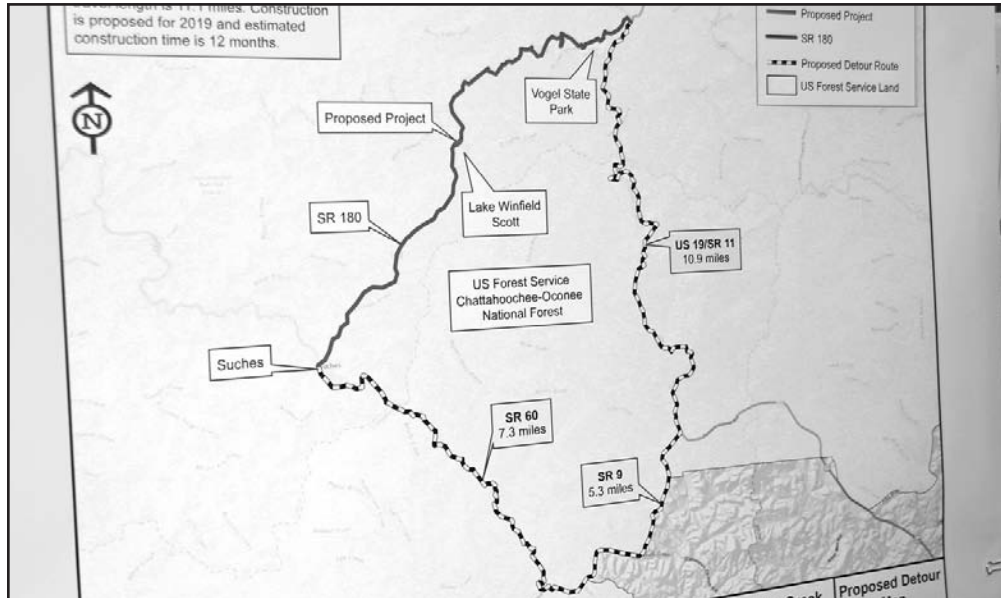
To do so online, visit www.dot.ga.gov/PS/Public/PublicOutreach. Then, select Union County in the “By County” box menu and click “Go” next to the box. After that, look for and click the link for “8/25/16 – SR 180 at Slaughter Creek (Detour OH).” Up above the general description will be a link marked “Comment.” Click on this and fill out the form.

Handwritten comment cards can also be mailed to: Mr. Eric Duff, Georgia Department of Transportation, 600 West Peachtree Street NW, 16th Floor, Atlanta, Georgia 30308.

For more information, contact Commissioner Paris’ office, which is located in the Union County Courthouse.



Rep. Stephen Allison, Sen. Steve Gooch and Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris ease people’s fears at the GDOT Detour Open House on Thursday, Aug. 25. Photo/Shawn Jarrard



The dashed line on the map represents the proposed detour should GDOT close the Lake Winfield Scott Bridge. The detour takes residents all the way down the mountain to get back up to Suches.

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