Better ride to, from Carowinds is focus

York County's Carowinds Boulevard Master Plan calls for cooperation and money to re-brand the interchange.

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As a child, Steve Peterson remembers his mother worrying about traffic when they went to the Carowinds amusement park. They had to leave home early to beat the traffic there and leave the park early to beat the traffic home.

All Peterson wanted to do was ride the rides, especially the roller coasters. He was happy if he went home "sunburned and sunbaked."

Today, Peterson is the park's neighbor. The steel skeleton of Carowinds' Intimidator roller coaster rises outside the front window of the Wendy's Old Fashioned Hamburgers off Carowinds Boulevard, where Peterson is general manager.

The restaurant's walls are filled with photos of coasters and other park rides, some retired.

Traffic is now his concern. On popular days, such as July 4, park traffic can all but shut down his restaurant.

Litter, frequently cited as one of the area's major problems, is also his concern. Often he walks the parking lot, picking up trash.

Jerry Helms has done his share of picking up trash. He is a vice president at Carowinds, one of the longer-serving staff members. Helms started there in 1973, he said, when it was "Carowinds and cow pastures."

Much has changed in the decades since the park opened, but many visitors still have the same impression of their arrival - an exit bordered by a rusting chain-link fence, too much trash, too many signs and too many vehicles on the road.
That's why Peterson and Helms are among the backers of the Carowinds Boulevard Master Plan, a blueprint drawn up by York County planners to transform the interchange into a gateway for South Carolina and the county.

The plan calls for reducing traffic congestion through improved roads and more medians, and cleaning up the physical and visual clutters by taking down signs and continuing litter control.

The goal is to create an atmosphere that will spur redevelopment.

The plan calls for public-private cooperation, as well as cooperation among business and property owners. It also calls for money - and most of it is unfunded.

Still, Peterson, Helms and others are confident.

Creating a sense of place

Making aesthetic improvements to businesses and the I-77 interchange are the first phase of a 25-year plan. Proponents say a cleaner, more attractive area would lure people interested in making the area a destination, rather than just a stop off the interstate.

Part of making the area a destination is creating a sense of place, and that starts with a "Welcome to South Carolina" monument or sign, as well as a "Welcome to York County" offering.

"A sense of place is important to branding," said Rich Harrill, director of the International Tourism Research Institute at the University of South Carolina. "When people are traveling, they like to feel that they have arrived."

Getting started

The York County Council was briefed on the Carowinds Boulevard plan last week. The county's Planning Commission is expected to endorse the plan on Monday. A public hearing on the plan is tentatively scheduled for December.

County Councilman Paul Lindemann, whose district includes the Carowinds Boulevard area, said he expects passage, funding and action to happen in short order.

The state has already funded $2.5 million in road improvements. Lindemann said the County Council will look to obtain other state and federal money to pay for improvements. He said the county can't be cautious about investing in the area.

"You can play it safe and spend zero, or you can step up and spend money," said Lindemann, who lost his bid for re-election in a June primary. He predicted the county's investment would yield a tenfold return.

Lindemann is optimistic because of the strategic location of the interchange, within minutes of the Charlotte market.

"God's gift to York County is Charlotte," he said.

Make the improvements, he said, and you can capture more of the Charlotte market, increasing both property-tax and sales-tax revenue.