

Board votes down Rt. 615 through-truck restriction

Speakers split over issue
at public hearing

BY JEFF POOLE
Editor

Essentially calling the proposed ban before them “the wrong tool for the job,” the Orange County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously last Tuesday against banning through-truck traffic on Route 615 and instead pledged to work toward a solution to “make everyone happy.”

At a packed public hearing with nearly 60 Rapidan and Orange residents, truck drivers, farmers and economic advocates, supervisors heard from more than 20 speakers, more or less evenly split in support and opposition of the proposed truck ban.

And while it would be safe to say “trucks” and “truck traffic” were common themes throughout the hour-and-a-half public hearing, what was less clear was which trucks would be restricted?

The proposed through-truck restriction on Route 615 (Rapidan Road) would begin at the intersection of North Madison Road and East Main Street in the Town of Orange, and head northeast for approximately 6.6 miles and terminate at the intersection of Rapidan Road and Old Rapidan Road

(Route 673) before the Rapidan River bridge and the Culpeper County boundary.

In proposing a restriction, the board must offer an alternative route. In this case, through-trucks seeking the same destination would travel North Madison Road to South Madison Road, to Caroline Street to Berry Hill Road and Constitution Highway (Route 20), east to Zachary Taylor Highway (Route 522) and north to the Culpeper County line—a difference of approximately 5 miles.

Any such restriction would apply to any truck and trailer or semitrailer combination, except a pickup or panel truck that has no point of origin or destination along the subject route. Local traffic would not be included in the requested restriction.

The board’s decision seemed to hinge on that distinction.

Many of those speaking in support of the ban cited an increased volume of traffic originating at the Culpeper County quarries north of Rapidan near Mitchells.

Only, this wouldn’t necessarily do that.

According to Alan Saunders, engineer of the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) residency, only trucks having no origin or destination along the traveled route would be restricted.

Even so, the board still would have to make a recommendation to the Commonwealth Transportation Board which would consider a number of factors in making its determination.

“I told everyone in Rapidan when I met with them, I would never stop the truck traffic,” District 3 Supervisor Teel Goodwin said after Tuesday’s public hearing closed. “The quarry traffic is off the table. I made that plain when all this came to bat.”

While it may ultimately have been moved off the table, it certainly was front and center much of the evening as multiple speakers supporting the ban cited personal experiences with dump trucks crossing the center line, speeding on the 45 mph rural scenic byway and numerous near-misses.

“Many of us have been squeezed and watched trucks cross the center line and speed when they can,” Carol Hallman, of Orange, told the board. “Cedar Mountain Quarry has access to Route 649 (Quarry Drive) to Route 15 with a 55 mph speed limit and a straight line into town. It seems like the board of supervisors needs

some sort of calamity to take this as far as it needs to go.”

Cynthia Pipes Johnson, of Rapidan, cited the historic nature and designation of the Rapidan community and Route 615’s status as one of only two scenic byways in the county as incongruous with the volume of truck traffic traveling through her neighborhood. “I’m seeing trucks from Walmart and Target. I see gravel trucks taking up both lanes and as soon as they get to that 45 mph sign, they’re not going 45 like they’re supposed to,” she said. “The professional drivers are not driving in a professional way.”

She encouraged the board to commission a study on the type of traffic using the road to author a better solution. “Route 615 in Orange County is a treasure; let’s keep it that way.”

Larry Jenkins, who lives on Route 615, told the board he wasn’t against anyone’s livelihood, but he was against trucks in the middle of the road and running people off the road.

“It’s supposed to be a scenic road, not a commercial highway,” he said.

Ashe Laughlin said he’d been pursuing the truck traffic issue for three years and noted he’d counted as many as 200 heavy, industrial trucks a day passing in front of his Rapidan Road home.

“This very day, well over 50 trucks passed in front of my house. I stopped counting, because I didn’t have time to continue. I’m afraid this is a harbinger of an ever-increasing norm,” he said. “Industrial and commercial trucks have created hugely, hugely unsafe driving conditions on our roads while pumping noxious pollutants into our air and filling our ears with intolerable noise.

“Trucks are destroying the character and peaceful enjoyment of our properties as well as property values in the historic village and town of Orange by turning it into an industrial corridor.”

Rapidan Road and East Main Street were never designed or engineered for this level of modern heavy, industrial traffic, he continued. “I’m convinced what we’re witnessing is the beginning of an ever-increasing problem unless we act now—there are safe alternative routes that are built to accommodate these types of vehicles.”

John Bensko said the issue at hand is one of balance. “There should be a balance between traffic and the

residents,” he said. “Now, there is no balance. The trucks have taken over and made it a dangerous road.

“It’s not about blocking trucks,” he continued. “It’s about re-routing trucks. Orange County is trying to create balance between commerce and other things, and this proposal helps to balance those things.”

Randall Rhoades, who lives on the Culpeper portion of Route 615, implored the board to “do something for the Rapidan residents in Orange County,” noting, “Culpeper’s not going to do a damn thing about them.”

Sandy Stumpf said he’s been driving Rapidan Road for 48 years and acknowledged truck traffic has increased significantly on the road, but added the commercial truck drivers show more respect for the farmers driving equipment on the narrow road.

“It’s a shame to penalize everyone for a few bad apples,” he said, suggesting banning trucks from the road would drive up the cost of gravel and concrete.

He also cautioned the board that if trucks could no longer use Route 615, they may choose Route 614, an unlined road from Rapidan to Locust Dale. “You’ll make that the most dangerous road in the state,” he warned. “You’ll create more problems than you’ll solve.”

Doc Garnett, who lives on Old Rapidan Road, cited the 1932 Byrd Act and said Virginia’s secondary roads system was established by the General Assembly to facilitate commerce—the transportation of good and materials to market. “That’s still the purpose of the road and why our tax dollars are dedicated to maintaining it,” he said. “It is not dedicated to sightseeing or pedestrians or the quietude of those who choose to live along side of it.

“Redirecting trucks on a route twice as long in distance and time through similar neighborhoods and adding to congestion in downtown Orange is not a suitable alternative route,” he concluded.

Kenneth Yount stood up to speak and said, “I’m here for the truckers. When the Rapidan Mill was running, trucks were running in and out of there all day.”

Restricting trucks on Rapidan Road would “only hurt the poor man,” he told the board. “If you reroute them, you’re going to be taking food off their table. They’ll probably lose two loads a day.”

Jeff Holsinger, a resident of the Town of Orange and an employee at Cedar Mountain Stone and Chemung Contracting, said trucks exiting the property are

checked for weight compliance. He said it wasn't the commercial trucks that were the problem on the road, but the cars and pickups behind them "jumping to get around."

Holsinger estimated restricting trucks on Rapidan Road would affect almost 300 jobs.

"The goal for folks is to reduce the truck traffic, but because of the loads lost, it will just increase the number of trucks on other routes," he said. "It'd really just transfer the burden to someone else and that's not fair."

Grant Christie, who claimed to live as close to the road as anyone (a fact Rhoades later corrected) suggested all traffic needed to slow down—not just the trucks.

"I'm all for efforts to slow traffic of all kinds, but I don't support restricting the truck traffic at all. Do I like traffic? No, but I accept it."

While earlier speakers talked about the safety of other motorists on the road, Wells Waugh expressed concern for the safety of the truck drivers—suggesting raising the speed limit from 25 mph to 35 mph through the village, and from 45 to 55 mph on the balance of the road would be a safer alternative. "That way, everyone can run together," he said.

The evening's final speaker, Bob Wilbanks, noted he had friends in the room on both sides of the issue and hoped, by the end of his remarks, he still maintained those friendships.

"We need some relief," he said, building toward a proposed compromise. "Help these people. Don't cut the truckers' throats, but make them behave themselves. Folks at the quarry—establish a phone line. These people aren't crazy. If they see a trucker misbehaving let them call that phone line. If they call them once, tell them what he was doing. Warn him. Second time, you put him on probation; tell him he can't haul for two days. That'll make him behave himself. He takes care of it without Mark [Sheriff Mark Amos] and his crew having to be out there."

District 4 Supervisor Jim Crozier latched on to Wilbanks' remarks and suggested this was an issue of enforcement and education.

He suggested Ed Dalrymple, of Cedar Mountain Stone, would be willing to set up such a hotline as Wilbanks proposed. "I know a lot of the drivers and 99 percent of them—just like good car drivers—obey the

law and do what they're supposed to do. Some self-policing would make a huge difference. I do believe a public education campaign from the community and Cedar Mountain Stone is the best solution."

"Orange County is growing," he continued. "Culpeper County is growing. Everything we do depends on commerce; without it, you wouldn't be able to get anything at the grocery store. In our first meeting about this, I felt we'd be opening up a can of worms we didn't want to touch and have had exactly what I predicted would happen: people have come up to me and said 'I want to restrict traffic on Route 20 or Route 15.' I understand the frustration and concerns, but the county depends on the commerce of our county and our neighbors."

"Of all the comments made this evening about through-truck traffic, only one comment was about through-trucks as VDOT defines it," board chair and District 2 Supervisor Jim White said. "What we have before us is a very narrow request to address through-truck traffic in Orange County's section of Route 615.

"It seems to me the issue of through-truck traffic doesn't warrant asking VDOT to commit resources and time to study a problem that is not the problem," he continued. "Probably a better solution is additional attention, self-enforcement and communication among those who live and particularly those who use the road. Rather than send VDOT off to pursue something that does not address the main problem, White said he'd rather work with VDOT, the community and the truckers to look at speed limits, enforcements and safety checks. "That's probably a better program that can be put in place and something we do have authority to deal with would be a better solution than a resolution that I think is missing the target entirely."

"When people have a problem, they cast about to try to find a solution to fix it," District 1 Supervisor Mark Johnson added. "The tool we have here is not the appropriate tool. To the extent this is a problem, I think there are better tools to address it. This would have a minimal effect on the problem that has folks upset, but more than a minimal effect on the economy of Orange County."

Additionally, Johnson said, removing trucks from Rapidan Road simply would mean placing them in

someone else's neighborhood instead. "The truck trips are not just going to disappear."

"There's a problem that needs to be resolved, but this [the proposed resolution] is not the solution," District 5 Supervisor Lee Frame said.

With that, Goodwin made a motion to reject the proposed restriction. "Based on the conversation tonight, there's a better alternative," he said. "We need to get people to work together to find a solution that makes everyone more happy."

Sharing the road

Education, awareness key to motorist and farmer safety

BY JEFF POOLE

Editor

Farming is a dangerous profession.

But more and more, the hazards of farming are extending beyond the fields and onto area roads.

To that end, the Orange County Farm Bureau and the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) are working together to help educate motorists about the dangers of slow-moving agricultural equipment on local roads.

“We have a lot more people coming to our area who aren’t used to driving around farm equipment,” Orange County Farm Bureau President Andy Hutchison said. “It’s a growing danger in our business.”

“Equipment is getting bigger and bigger but roads are not,” Farm Bureau sign committee chairman Ray Matthews said. “And traffic is increasing.”

That creates a dangerous situation for farmers and motorists.

Nationwide, about 15,000 farm vehicles are involved in highway crashes a year, according to the National Safety Council. Two-thirds of accidents are rear-end collisions, and those killed are usually the tractor operators.

In April, a Bedford County farmer was killed after a tractor-trailer struck his tractor on U.S. 221. Both were heading north when the farmer attempted to

make a left turn and was hit by the tractor-trailer attempting to pass in a no-passing zone. Hutchison nearly experienced the same situation in Somerset. He was driving on a narrow road and the vehicle behind him attempted to pass him as he prepared to turn left.

VDOT Communications Manager Lou Hatter confirmed the farmers’ concerns.

“Orange County has a substantial agricultural presence and as the population changes and the county becomes more of a destination, we’re seeing an increasing number of vehicles on the roads.”

Farm equipment tends to catch many of those motorists by surprise, Matthews added. “They don’t seem to understand why we don’t just pull over and let them by.”

Easier said than done.

“We want to be courteous to the motorists. We’d like to pull over, but that’s hard to do with wide equipment that already takes up most of the road,” Matthews continued. “Sometimes there’s just no safe place to get off the road.”

The combination of fast traffic and slow equipment is a threat to both farmer and motorist, Hatter added. “That distance can close pretty fast.”

While there haven’t been any recent accidents in Orange County, Matthews cites a number of close calls and near-misses.

“We want to make people aware of this situation rather than react to some sort of tragedy,” Hatter said.

Education and awareness are the keys. So, signs.

VDOT is working with local farmers to place portable changeable message signs in areas where heightened agricultural activity is occurring. Most motorists have seen these types of signs—mounted on trailers—as they approach special events, alerting them to changes in traffic patterns or dangerous conditions.

“The advantage to these signs is that the message can be tailored to specific circumstances,” Hatter said. “Drivers tend to pay more attention to them rather than permanent signs which tend to fade into the landscape.”

“With these signs, people would know they’re entering an active agriculture area and be alert to that,” Matthews added, noting permanent signs

also can be useful, some of which have been installed recently along Route 669 (Marquis Road).

The portable message signs could be placed during spring planting, hay cutting and harvest—or other high-intensity periods during the agricultural calendar.

Hatter encouraged farmers and producers to contact their local VDOT office to request signs for placement.

Meanwhile, VDOT also is considering adding pull-off spots on the Route 522 corridor—a heavily farmed area. But that's more of a long-term solution to a current concern.

“This would allow farm equipment to safely pull off the highway and allow motorists to safely pass,” Hatter explained. “We're trying to find ways for motorists and the ag community to coexist safely,” Hatter said.

“We're concerned for everyone's safety—not just the farmer,” Matthews concluded.

Public safety facility progress

County “breaks ground” on \$12.2 million complex by airport

BY JEFF POOLE

Editor

More than 30 years ago, most of the county’s emergency service calls were dispatched by one person out of a radio room at the Orange County Courthouse.

Tuesday afternoon, on an active construction site on Bloomsbury Road, county officials joined law enforcement, emergency communications, information technology and fire and rescue staff to “break ground” on the county’s new \$12.2 million public safety facility that’s expected to serve the county’s needs for at least the next 20 years.

Orange County Emergency Communications Center Director and Public Safety Systems Manager Dominique Curry said construction on the site began Jan. 7 and has a projected completion date of Sept. 4, 2020.

“This building represents the vision of a cohesive approach to public safety for the citizens and visitors of Orange County,” she said, at Tuesday’s program. The new 34,000-square-foot facility will house the Orange County Sheriff’s Office, County of Orange Fire and EMS, Orange County communications center and IT department, while providing a state-of-the-art emergency operations center, future board of supervisors’ meeting room and training areas/community space.

“We truly are excited for the future of public safety and grateful to the leadership of Orange County for making this all possible,” Curry said.

The center site includes 34 acres beyond the western edge of the Orange County Airport purchased from Helen Marie Taylor for \$850,000.

The building will feature single-story construction with one main public entrance into a central lobby space that serves each of the building’s tenants. The lobby, which has a distinctive rotunda feature, is separated from the rest of the facility via access-controlled doorways. There are customer service windows in the lobby for the sheriff’s office and fire and EMS administration office, since those agencies anticipate the most public interaction. Each entity would have a separate wing but would be connected by a main hallway. That building plan also includes almost 9,000-square feet of shared space.

Sheriff Mark Amos recounted a brief history of the evolution of the county’s communications and sheriff’s office operations during his 32 years with the county, beginning with the “radio room” anecdote.

In the 1980s, the sheriff’s office operated out of the Orange County Courthouse and the abandoned former Orange County Rescue Squad station behind it (where Wayne Modena’s State Farm office is now).

“Around 1990, when the Central Virginia Regional Jail opened, we moved our offices from there to where we are now,” he said. “We had a staff of about 20 then. We have a staff of about 50 now.”

The “new” sheriff’s office included a dispatch center where two employees dispatched all the county’s fire and EMS calls until a disagreement between then-Sheriff Bill Spence and the board of supervisors in 1996 led to a communications split. Law enforcement call dispatches remained at the sheriff’s office, while fire and rescue calls were handled by a new communications center in the basement of the Gordon Building.

Ten years later, having since outgrown its 1990 footprint, the sheriff’s office received \$15,000 in county funds to expand.

“We had a budget of \$15,000 to put on a 30 x 36-foot addition,” Amos said. “I knew there was no way we would get a contractor to take that job. I

was chief deputy at the time and volunteered to serve as the general contractor.”

The employees of the sheriff’s office built about 90 percent of that addition, the sheriff said, with the same blockwork and everything. “With the exception of a wavy concrete floor, it was done very professionally,” he declared.

After he became sheriff, Amos said individual supervisors would discuss merging communications again, but those discussions didn’t gain traction until county administrator Bryan David arrived.

“With safety issues, a lack of space in the 911 center and the radio system not being up to standard, the county decided to fix the problems and move the communications centers back together,” he said. By 2018 the two dispatch centers had merged and the sheriff sent his six communications officers to the Gordon Building where all emergency calls were being dispatched.

“Imagine the amount of staff they had and throw six more people into it. They’re screaming over there; it’s tight,” he said. “Soon we’ll be right here. We’ve come a long way. It’s an exciting time for fire and EMS, for the communications center, IT department, me and my staff and the citizens of Orange County.

“In closing I’ll say this, ‘I sure am glad I’m not the general contractor for this.’ ”

District 2 Supervisor and board chair Jim White said the new project offers two distinct advantages to public safety—the more obvious one being the provision of adequate space for departments that have long since outgrown their quarters.

“Another piece, less well known and recognized, is that a lot of our systems, the public safety radio system being one of them—are really old. It’s hard to get parts to repair them,” he said. “This new building allows us to move to the state-of-the art with technology and data services, which, in turn, will allow our staff to better serve the citizens of the community, be more efficient about it and, frankly, do their jobs more safely.”

Right now, fire, rescue and sheriff’s office can’t speak to each other very directly, he noted, and many parts of the county do not have adequate radio coverage. “This initiative addresses all those

issues and in the end, serve the citizens more effectively and get us to the level of service they expect.”

Because the nearby worksite was muddy from recent rains, most of Tuesday’s program was staged in the Booster Park parking area.

But following everyone’s remarks, an audience of about 50, made its way over to the jobsite where actual ground had been broken more than five months ago. Still, shiny gold shovels, bright white hard hats and some carefully placed gravel piles had been assembled for the ceremonial exercise.

A line-up of county staff, contractors, engineers and officials tossed a few shovelfuls of gravel to complete the program.

At that evening’s board of supervisors’ meeting, the board, needing to create a 911 address for the building’s location, agreed to name it Government Center Drive.

“It’s not the most imaginative name,” District 1 Supervisor Mark Johnson countered, though District 3 Supervisor Teel Goodwin suggested the county could change it at any time.