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## Dakota County studying plans for future roads

So far, it's mostly open space and farmland.

But there are big plans for a 24-square-mile chunk of central Dakota County: mining and up to 30,000 residents at what is now UMore Park, a nature preserve at the Vermillion Highlands, a county park on the Butler Trust, and other growth in Rosemount, Farmington and Empire Township.

And someday, everyone will need to get around. But which roads will they use? Do new ones need to be built? If so, where should they go?

"The ultimate goal is to come up with a vision for the roadway system that everybody involved can agree to," said Brian Sorenson, a transportation program engineer for Dakota County.

But that discussion, part of a transportation study led by Dakota County, has already grown heated as some worry about merging pavement and traffic into areas now used for farming, conservation and hunting.

"Obviously you've got urban sprawl, and we need areas like this to be maintained for wildlife," said Dan Richmond, a member Pheasants Forever, a habitat conservation organization.

Richmond was one of more than three dozen officials and interested citizens who attended an

open house at the Rosemount Community Center on a snowy day this month. Examining a semicircle of poster boards showing various maps and outlining development goals, they chatted about future routes through the area, which covers a wide swath of Empire Township and extends as far north as County Road 42 in Rosemount.

"There's a wide range of interests and issues here," said Andy Brotzler, a Rosemount city engineer.

The members of Pheasants Forever in Dakota County said they are worried that Blaine Avenue East, also known as County Road 79, will be expanded north through the middle of the Vermillion Highlands. The 2,800-acre area is managed by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and used for research and conservation projects, such as prairie restoration, and for hunting.

"We don't need a road stuffed through 2,000 acres," Mark Henry, a Pheasants Forever member, said.

He and Richmond recommended that County Road 81, if improved, could be a workable north-south route that skirts the edge of the Vermillion Highlands instead of going through the middle.

The county is collecting such feedback from the public and will hold another open house in June

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when there are some options mapped out. The goal is to produce a draft transportation plan in time for a third open house in November.

"Once people see lines on paper, we'll probably get more input," Sorenson said.

But Richard Brand, a lifelong farmer who lives on Biscayne Avenue -- one of the potential north-south corridors -- said he thought he'd better register his concerns early.

Expanding Biscayne to handle more traffic would push the road's right-of-way closer to his house and other buildings on the family farm that his sons and grandson would like to keep working.

"We would be concerned about the traffic because we're farmers and drive farm equipment," Brand said.

Whatever the study's final recommendations, they will serve as a guide for future development. Many of the roads, if constructed, wouldn't appear for years because full-scale development at UMore Park is still decades away.

The university regents approved a concept master plan for future development at the 5,000-acre park on the northern end of the study area last fall. An environmental review process is underway to evaluate the options for mining sand and gravel at UMore, but a decision likely won't be made until 2010.

For now, it's about finding a transportation plan that balances all the future needs.

"How do we provide the mobility that the public is going to need and still preserve those areas?" Sorenson said. "The solutions, we don't know what they're going to be."


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