

Late work is nightmare for some ICC neighbors

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The first night the rumbling from the Intercounty Connector construction kept him awake, Fred Begosh said he grew so desperate that he drove a half-mile to a quiet church parking lot and spent two long hours trying to sleep in his Oldsmobile.

The second night, Begosh said, he packed a bag and took the Maryland State Highway Administration up on its offer of a complimentary hotel stay.

During the past two weeks, Begosh has slept four nights in a Gaithersburg hotel. One night, he came across one of his Derwood neighbors in the hotel lobby. She, too, had had enough.

"The noise was insane," Begosh said. "The house was vibrating. It was brutal."

Ten of Begosh's neighbors from the Winters Run subdivision joined him at Montgomery County hotels between Sept. 8 and 15 as crews paved and painted stripes on part of the 18.8-mile highway's westernmost section, ICC officials said. Hundreds more living near the 1.5-mile stretch between Shady Grove Road and Olde Mill Run endured the all-night noise in their own beds.

State officials said the paving is noisy because workers use giant vibrating rollers to compact the earth -- and there's the cacophony generated by the engines of the huge trucks and construction equipment.

The ICC has long been plagued by its proximity to -- and effects upon -- densely populated Montgomery and northwestern Prince George's County, but the past two weeks have been among the most irritating for many who have lived with the construction for more than two years. Some residents said their homes vibrated so much because of the noisy earth-pounding equipment that dishes rattled in cupboards and teapots shook on stoves.

"Just as you're dozing off, you hear 'Bang! Crash!' and then you can't get to sleep because you keep expecting to hear it again," said Ruth Hepner, one of Begosh's neighbors. Hepner declined the state's hotel offer because she didn't want to leave her home.

Impacts on nearby neighborhoods, along with environmental concerns and the project's costs, blocked the ICC's construction for 50 years. ICC officials say they understand residents' irritation and let those within 500 feet know when the relatively unusual overnight work is planned. But Begosh and Hepner, whose homes are so close to the ICC that their back yards are now bordered by a concrete sound wall, said they had no warning.

Most construction takes place Mondays through Saturdays between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m., officials said, but contractors are permitted to work around the clock. When work will occur on a Sunday or overnight, a "community outreach" team sends e-mails to neighborhood associations and leaves fliers on doorknobs, the officials said. The contractor is required to give residents a two-day break after five consecutive late nights.

At a \$189 daily rate, residents' hotel costs over the past two weeks totaled \$6,500. It will be paid by the contractor, said Ray Feldmann, the project's coordinator of community outreach, and it doesn't change the cost of what the state will pay for the project.

"Sometimes you just don't know how loud noise will be in a community" until work begins, he said. "We try to avoid [overnight work] when we can, but sometimes it's just unavoidable."

Some residents questioned whether they lost sleep because work crews, who are behind schedule as they head into the fall, are scrambling to open the first 7.2-mile section between Interstate 370 and Georgia Avenue by the promised date of "late 2010 or early 2011." ICC officials raised the possibility of more overnight work in February, when they said construction had fallen several months behind because of an unusually rainy 2009.

While the first segment remains "a little behind where we thought we'd be," Feldmann said, this latest overnight work was done because paving and painting stripes is safer without other workers around. It also allowed the paint to dry before other construction vehicles needed to use the road.

Other overnight work can involve pouring concrete, which in hot weather needs cooler night temperatures to set properly, Feldmann said.

He said project leaders still hope to open the first segment by year's end, depending on the weather. The first section is 83 percent complete, Feldmann said. The middle section between Georgia Avenue and U.S. 29 is half-finished, while the eastern segment between U.S. 29 and Interstate 95 is 70 percent done.

Because of residents' complaints and the number of hotel stays requested recently -- the highest since construction began in mid-2007 -- state officials asked the contractor Wednesday to stop overnight work in the Shady Grove and Derwood areas, where houses are particularly close to the construction, said Carla Julian, community liaison for the highway's first segment.

The contractor switched its day crews to that section and moved its overnight crews further east to an area near Norbeck Road and Georgia Avenue, where homes are farther away and have sound walls or berms shielding them from the noise, Julian said.

Those residents and any others near overnight work also will be offered free hotel stays, she said.

The full highway between Gaithersburg and Laurel is scheduled to open by early 2012. It is estimated to cost \$2.56 billion, much of which will be financed by tolls.

Wayne Burnside, another Winters Run resident, said he "just put up with" the rumbling of trucks and heavy equipment that jarred him awake; moving to a hotel was too inconvenient, he said. Although annoyed with the noise, he's willing to get by on less sleep if all-night work means the project is completed faster.

As Burnside put it, "Just get done, for heaven's sake, and be gone."