NCDOT officials met with concerned businessmen yesterday in what turned into a crowded affair.

Dozens of business owners showed up, questions in tow. The topic at hand was the 421 widening project. Businesses like P.C. Medics, Daniel Boone Inn, and Grace Lutheran Church will all be affected by the widening. Many, including Doe Ridge Pottery, will be forced to relocate.

DOT’s Wayne Patterson said the relocation itself can’t be stopped.

“Relocation is not a negotiation. Relocation is just what it is. It’s set.”

There are two ways it can happen, DOT’s John Thompson said.

“Either through negotiations and settling a claim with a property owner or, if that’s not possible… sometimes condemnation takes place.”

The tentative letting date is April of 2009, which means at the latest, ninety day vacation notices would be sent in February. Depending on negotiations, businesses could be forced to move as early as this summer.

“There’s a window there of time and we don’t know how exactly it’s going to work out as to when a settlement takes place.”

By not knowing when the relocation will happen, it’s hard to purchase advertising and plan for the year ahead, business owners said.

Doe Ridge Pottery owner Bob Meier asked if the ninety days could be extended. Meier fears the relocation will happen in the fall- his busiest season.

“For me to close down for a month or two and conduct a move at that part of the year is detrimental at best and suicidal most likely.”

Officials said that, depending on the time frame, latitude might be granted on the ninety days.

Another chief concern of business owners is the relocating itself. In order to be eligible for relocation compensation, businessmen were initially told they had to occupy the structure up to the time of notification. Yesterday, business owners were told they could move to another location earlier and still be eligible for compensation.

It’s also about moving costs. Businesses can be compensated- but there’s a cap at $12,500- and that cap was developed in the 1970s. Business owners feel the sum does not reflect rent averages in Boone in 2008. DOT officials said updating that is a legislative issue, not a departmental one, and encouraged concerned parties to contact local representatives.

Several citizens felt there was more at play than traffic concerns surrounding the new high school.

DOT designer Greg Brew rejected an idea brought up that the plan was initiated to convenience the University.

“There are a lot of projects that I have worked at in DOT that I kind of scratch my head and go, ‘why are we doing this?’ This is not one of them. When you look at the amount of cars that are on this road and are projected to be on this road, if there was a road that needs to be widened, this is a road that definitely deserves.”

Citizens repeatedly posed the question: is widening one extra block worth the risking local businesses?

DOT ended the meeting saying they would be in touch with business owners as plans progress.