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## Backers of I-73 fish for funding

Sanford, DOT catch flak for stowing rods  
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Local tourism and government leaders are trying to come up with alternative ways to pay for Interstate 73, the road that would link Michigan to Myrtle Beach, because they are worried they might soon lose a chance to get critical funding.

They're pointing fingers at Gov. Mark Sanford and the S.C. Department of Transportation, saying the state is not doing enough to garner support and money for the 85-mile-long S.C. segment that is expected to cost \$2.4 billion to build.

The governor's office and the DOT say they still support the project, but the road is not nearly far along enough to be eligible for money from an upcoming federal stimulus package, as Grand Strand officials hope.

The stimulus package is aimed at creating jobs as soon as possible, and leaders are arguing over whether I-73 is ready to go - as well as who would make that call.

The biggest hurdle for the highway for some time has been how to pay for it. Ideas have included involving a private company and putting tolls on the road.

The highway still needs a half dozen agencies to sign off on construction permits.

The state also needs to buy land for the road and figure out how much it will cost to purchase and preserve land to make up for wetland that will be paved over.

If all this is achieved, the earliest the S.C. portion of the road could be ready is 2014.

Supporters of the road say it will create tens of thousands of jobs in the short and long term, bring more tourists to the beach by providing a direct route and increase trading at S.C. ports.

Local officials hope to get two stabs at funding for the road this year - first from the federal stimulus plan expected to be passed shortly after President-elect Obama takes office, and second from a federal bill on the table this year that provides funding for highway projects.

"If we miss this train, if we miss these two opportunities, the train's not going to come around again for years," said Rep. Alan Clemmons, R-Myrtle Beach.

Danny Isaac, the state transportation commissioner who represents the Grand Strand, said the DOT supports I-73, but it is simply not "shovel-ready," meaning it's not ready for construction to start, which might be a prerequisite for money from the stimulus.

"If I-73 or portions of I-73 were to fit in the criteria of the stimulus package, I feel confident that we can get some portion of that," he said. "I-73 is not anywhere near there."

At a meeting Friday at the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce, business and political leaders talked about calling out the governor and the Transportation Department - in the opinion pages of newspapers across the state - for what they see as dragging their feet.

"They don't handle embarrassment very easily, and I think that's unfortunately a method we're going to have to use," said Rep. Tracy Edge, R-North Myrtle Beach.

They blamed DOT Secretary Buck Limehouse for not moving fast enough.

**“It seems to me we ought to have a public flogging of DOT,” said Woody Crosby, president of hotel group Jordan Properties. “We’re never going to change [Gov. Sanford’s] mind about this. The reason [Limehouse] is acting that way is because of the governor. We need to put him on the spot. The nice guy approach does not work, and it won’t work.”**

**Limehouse said neither he nor the governor control which projects receive funding, rather it’s up to the DOT commission’s seven-member board, and he accused Grand Strand officials of taking political pot shots.**

**Grand Strand representatives also scoffed at Sanford’s stance on the stimulus.**

**Sanford thinks the spending would saddle future generations with expensive projects they have no say in, the governor’s spokesman Joel Sawyer said.**

**Frustrated, officials are trying to figure out other ways to come up with the money. One way would be to support a proposal from U.S. Rep. Jim Clyburn, D-Columbia, to funnel stimulus money to councils of governments or the State Infrastructure Bank if the state, at the direction of the governor, does not use it after a certain time period.**

**Clyburn said he “absolutely” thinks I-73 is the type of project that should be paid for through the federal stimulus, but it was up to Sanford to decide which projects receive funding. He criticized Sanford for his stance on the stimulus.**

**“Gov. Sanford enunciates a lack of vision in the big picture that the people of Horry County and the Grand Strand benefit from,” Clyburn said.**

**One suggestion is to use federal money to build an interchange on the northern side of I-95 through Dillon County, which would eventually become part of I-73.**

**“What you would be doing is you’d be building a usable stretch of I-73 that connects with two existing highways,” said Rep. Doug Jennings, D-Marlboro.**

**Another method would be to form an authority with taxation power to take the issue out of the hands of Sanford’s office, suggested Edge, a frequent critic of the governor.**

**Sawyer said Edge needs to focus, instead, on congressional delegation members, who have not voted on the stimulus bill yet.**

**“If he wants to make sure that I-73 fits the criteria of an eventual stimulus bill he needs to be barking to Washington, D.C.,” Sawyer said.**