

DOT promises to kick in funding for I-73 project

By Zane Wilson - For The Sun News

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Interstate 73 received a major boost Thursday when the state Department of Transportation Commission agreed to transfer \$80 million to build the I-95 interchange and six miles of road if supporters can garner enough money to pay the rest of the \$185 million cost.

The unanimous vote doesn't mean new funds for I-73, but "it's an important step to position the project to begin construction on the ground," said Brad Dean, president of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce and of the National I-73/74 Corridor Association.

The highway is planned to traverse six states and connect Horry County to Canada.

The agreement means I-73 supporters can go to Washington and show state support for the first piece of the project, which will help get the federal money to pay for the rest of it, Dean said.

"To that end, I think it will do what it needs to do," said Rep. Tracy Edge, R-North Myrtle Beach, who co-chairs the S.C. I-73 Association.

He and Rep. Alan Clemmons, R-Myrtle Beach, chairman of the National I-73/74 Corridor Association, also spoke to the commission about the need to show state support for the road.

The state has designated I-73 as its top priority for new construction but has not allocated much money to it.

Supporters have high hopes of getting money from a special federal road grant fund, and from the upcoming highway funding bill, Dean said.

The commission grilled Dean and other supporters, including 1st Congressional District Commissioner Danny Isaac of Myrtle Beach, for two hours. Isaac brought the resolution to the commission.

"Boy, it was not easy, they made us work for that one," Dean said.

Edge said that at one point it appeared the vote was 4-3 but Isaac "was persistent," he said.

One commissioner questioned the inclusion of I-74, and Dean and Edge explained that it is part of an agreement with the state of North Carolina. North Carolina intends to build I-74 as a leg off I-73 from near Hamlet, N.C., to Brunswick County, N.C., and then down into Horry County to connect with S.C. 31.

The agreement also included the locations of entry of I-73 into South Carolina and that South Carolina would handle the planning for the short section between the state line and Hamlet.

Dean said questions were also raised about why the first segment should be built from I-95 to U.S. 501 and whether the section would be a road to nowhere. "I-95 brings 75 percent of our visitors to the Grand Strand," he said.

Dean said supporters are "betting on" federal money for the project because it has the state support and is almost ready for construction.

A new federal highway funding bill is in development, and the state's delegation is working to get I-73 included, Dean said. Also, the road is a good candidate for a federal highway construction grant program the Obama administration created to jump-start projects and get people to work.

The resolution says the DOT can divert the money to planning and buying rights of way for the interchange and six-mile segment for two years, if other funding is secured.

If money to finish the project does not come in by 2011, the money can be used to buy rights of way along other parts of the highway.

I-73 was designated by Congress in 1991 along with 39 other new interstates, but few have seen much construction. North Carolina has built part of I-73 and I-74, West Virginia has built a small section, and Virginia is working on a segment.

The road was originally planned to connect Charleston and Detroit but over the years one end shifted to Myrtle Beach or Horry County and the other shifted to Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., at the Canadian border.

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