

## Lobbying group gains hope for I-73

### *Delegation presses for infrastructure*

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WASHINGTON—The proposed interstate between Michigan and Myrtle Beach was on the front burner for a group of Grand Strand representatives in the nation's capital Tuesday to drum up support from S.C. legislators.

More than 50 officials from Myrtle Beach, North Myrtle Beach, Surfside Beach, Horry County and the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce, as well as several others, flew to Washington on Tuesday morning for meetings with U.S. Rep. Henry Brown, whose district includes parts of Horry, Georgetown and Charleston counties, as well as South Carolina's junior senator, Jim DeMint.

The Senate and House of Representatives on Tuesday debated President Obama's call for an \$825 billion stimulus package - part of which would fund road and infrastructure projects. Grand Strand leaders are seeking a portion of the money for such plans as Interstate 73 and the Myrtle Beach International Airport.

Coastal Carolina University research economist Don Schunk has said the \$2.4 billion highway would create more than 7,700 jobs and \$1.2 billion in income during construction alone.

He told the officials gathered on Capitol Hill that road projects are going to be critical to quickly rebuilding the nation's economy.

I-73 could be so significant nationally, some say, it could qualify for grant money debated Tuesday in the Senate Transportation Appropriation's subcommittee that would pay for long-term surface transportation projects that aren't necessarily shovel-ready in the next 180 days - as the stimulus programs could require - but could be finished within the next few years.

"I-73 would serve a half-dozen states," said Horry County Council Chairwoman Liz Gilland. "It's not simply a local project. I would think the federal government would move projects that are federal in scope to the top of the priority list."

The group heard a more optimistic outlook for I-73 than what had been said earlier in the week. S.C. senior Sen. Lindsey Graham said during the weekend that he didn't believe the road would receive funding because it would be viewed as an earmark.

Ryan Bowley, legislative director for Brown, said the U.S. Department of Transportation would decide where road money would go, not Congress, making the \$480 million South Carolina is poised to get a grant, not an earmark.

And Brown said he hoped Congress could agree on even more spending for roads and infrastructure than the proposed \$30 billion.

Myrtle Beach City Councilman Michael Chestnut said he was happy to hear the early afternoon message.

"Listening to [Graham] and our governor, I thought maybe we'd be coming up here in the dark," Chestnut said. "We also need to remind them that the Grand Strand is the cash cow for the state. You have to feed the cow, because if the milk dries up, we're all in trouble."

Another message area leaders got: The Myrtle Beach International Airport's improvement plans are shovel-ready.

Rick Ott, with MB Kahn, the construction company that has been working on plans to improve the airport's commercial terminal, told the Grand Strand officials he had assurances Monday from the Community Appearance Board in Myrtle Beach that board members would work with the airport so the plans will be considered shovel-ready and eligible for federal stimulus money.

Gilland said she thinks the airport and the interstate are equally important because they both affect tourism in South Carolina.

North Myrtle Beach Mayor Marilyn Hatley said the U.S. Congress of Mayors meeting in Washington last week gave officials the chance to talk about local projects that could be funded with stimulus money, such as stormwater outfalls and street projects, but now was the time to concentrate on large-scale plans such as I-73, which would help the Pee Dee, too, by bringing tourists through there on their way to the Grand Strand.

DeMint was the last speaker Tuesday afternoon, and said he doesn't support the stimulus plans because "we can't keep borrowing and spending to get out of a recession." But he and others recognize that Obama's stimulus money is likely to be given out, and he said he would do what he could to make sure South Carolina is treated fairly in the process.

Myrtle Beach City Councilman Randal Wallace said he wasn't surprised by what he heard from DeMint. "He's been consistent," Wallace said. "He's not for federal spending."

But, Schunk said, projects that can bring jobs to the region are important. Horry County's unemployment rate was up to 11.5 percent in December, according to statistics released Tuesday by the S.C. Employment Security Commission.

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