

Make I-73 Ready to Go

Include key Strand project on S.C. infrastructure list

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Opinion

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The early word from Washington is that South Carolina could get \$2.5 billion to \$4 billion as part of President-elect Obama's infrastructure plan for the states. So that bodes well for Interstate 73, the S.C. Department of Transportation's putative No. 1 new-road construction priority, right?

Not necessarily. For reasons not yet clear, the S.C. DOT's enthusiasm for I-73 has waned. If Congress comes through with infrastructure money next year as presently imagined, I-73-related projects might get *none* of it.

Why? The Obama infrastructure plan will plow money into ready-to-go projects around the country. But in the S.C. DOT's view, I-73, which would link Myrtle Beach with Interstate 95 and metro Charlotte, N.C., doesn't fall into that category.

Someone needs to tell the S.C. DOT leadership: "*No, no, no. That's just not acceptable.*" Fortunately, the Grand Strand has just the guy to do that: Myrtle Beach entrepreneur Danny Isaac, who represents the 1st Congressional District on the seven-member commission that steers the S.C. DOT.

Isaac should tell the agency secretary, Buck Limehouse, and his boss, Gov. Mark Sanford, that at least one key I-73-related project *can* and *should* be ready to go if federal infrastructure money flows into the S.C. DOT pipeline next year.

This is reasonable. The environmental impact statement for I-73 is complete and the project has obtained its record of decision from the Federal Highway Administration last spring. The agency has nailed down the routes for the I-73 leg between I-95 and S.C. 22. The agency has received more than \$85 billion for acquisition of right-of-way and (presumably) begun spending it for that purpose. If the project has not yet achieved ready-to-go status, that can only be attributed to foot-dragging at the S.C. DOT.

Isaac's mission is to get the agency's top leadership and middle-management off their duffs and focused on I-73. As local folks saw while the Road Improvement Development Effort I program was in effect, the S.C. DOT does know how to move projects quickly from right-of-way acquisition through design approval to construction readiness. It's all a matter of motivation.

The last construction-cost estimate for I-73 - now outdated and likely too low - was \$2 billion. So it's not realistic - or fair - for local leaders to expect that the bulk of the S.C. infrastructure appropriation would go to that project.

It would be enough if Limehouse and Sanford, at the behest of Isaac and 6th District DOT Commissioner Marvin Stevenson, agreed to use part of the money to construct I-73's most expensive project: the I-73 interchange with I-95 in Dillon County. That structure, once completed, would make I-73 real at last, making it easier for local, regional and state leaders to line up private and public money for actual roadway construction.

Don't misunderstand: The editorial board gets it that any infrastructure money coming through the federal pipeline must be spread to projects around the state. Every part of South Carolina deserves a quick infusion of federal money to free up clogged regional economies while putting laid-off people back to work.

All the Grand Strand is asking is that its most important projects be included in the mix. Because that request is reasonable, and vital to reviving S.C. tourism, Isaac should have no trouble making it - and obtaining the desired results.