

Sun News, The (Myrtle Beach, SC)
July 6, 2004
Section: FRONT
Page: A8
Column:Editorial

CONFUSION, ANGST ON INTERSTATE 73

OK, we're confused.

Last month, the S.C. Department of Transportation squelched what had been rampant speculation that its designation of a route for Interstate 73 was imminent. Not until a contractor has completed a draft environmental impact statement on the land between Myrtle Beach and inland interstate complex - likely in mid-2005 - will the S.C. DOT announce the alternatives for an I-73 route. And not until mid 2006 will the agency designate its preferred alternative for the road. Environmental impact statements, said the agency, dare not be rushed.

Then, last week, U.S. Sen Lindsey Graham, R-Seneca, blew into the Strand for a speaking engagement with the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce, during which he dropped an I-73 bombshell: ``If we do not designate this route sooner rather than later, we could lose this road to North Carolina."

Graham urged local political and business leaders to push hard for a quick decision on highway route choice.

It was disconcerting enough that Graham earlier this year voted against the Senate transportation bill that contains money for the project. Now he's telling us North Carolina apparently has some way to glom onto our I-73 project while the S.C. Department of Transportation dithers (as he apparently sees it) on route selection?

Apparently Graham is unaware that in a series of meetings with S.C. newspapers in June, S.C. DOT leaders depicted the route-designation delay as a necessity of the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act. The act, they said, requires that any project slated to receive federal money must undergo analyses of potential effects before the feds give approval for the project.

As part of that, the S.C. DOT officials led us (at least) to believe that National Environmental Policy Act-required studies safely could proceed parallel to the politics of the project here and in Washington. Waiting two years to designate a route for Myrtle Beach's high-speed link with the inland interstate complex, they intimated, would not affect the outcome of the political debate.

The hope must be that the senator's take on the situation is wrong - that he spoke unmindful or unaware of the requirements of the law, as the S.C. DOT presents them. It's

important that all potential environmental effects of the I-73 routing alternatives be understood before a final route is chosen. To stampede the process risks inflicting needless damage on fragile Pee Dee and Grand Strand ecosystems.

Graham and the S.C. DOT need quickly to get onto the same page regarding Interstate 73. The senator and the agency might also get together with the N.C. counterparts to quell any predatory impulses they might be feeling about bagging I-73 for themselves. This must - must - be an S.C. project.

To leave the local folks twisting in the winds of angst and uncertainty on this issue would be neither fair nor politically prudent. We need the straight story - quickly.

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