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CONGRESS SHELVES I-73 HIGHWAY BILL

Zane Wilson The Sun News

Congress adjourned Monday without passing a new highway bill that contains \$20 million for Interstate 73.

But plans for South Carolina's leg of the road to run from Myrtle Beach to Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., is continuing, as engineers begin work on computer models of routes. There also is a meeting next month with highway officials from North Carolina to try to resolve the long-standing question of where I-73 should meet at the border between the two Carolinas.

Congress plans to reconvene Nov. 16, but it is still uncertain whether the highway bill will pass this year, said U.S. Rep. Henry Brown, R-Hanahan.

The six-year highway funding bill expired Sept. 30, 2003. Bills extending it have been passed three times, the most recent being two weeks ago, for eight months. The extensions authorize the current level of spending.

A conference committee of House and Senate members is trying to resolve differences in the bill and the Congress' disagreement with President Bush over how much should be spent.

The committee has not met since July 22, but Brown said members are working among themselves and with the White House trying to reach agreement.

Brown put \$10 million in the bill for I-73, and so did U.S. Rep. John Spratt, D-York.

I-73 planners are working on a computer-based mapping system that will be used for the first time in South Carolina to draw possible routes for the leg of I-73 that runs to Myrtle Beach from I-95.

"We're going to use the computer because we have most all of the information we need," said Mitchell Metts, I-73 project manager for the S.C. Department of Transportation.

The road planners will take into account comments received at two public meetings in September and use information stored in the computer systems about the locations of historical sites and other places that should be avoided, Metts said.

They also can plug in information on areas, such as wetland, that they want to avoid, he said.

“We expect a whole lot of alternatives” to begin with, Metts said.

Then planners will make site visits to see how the lines the computer suggests play out on the ground.

It will probably be spring before the possible routes are narrowed down to some that are feasible and presented to the public, Metts said.

“This is just a first step,” he said.

Of more immediate importance is a settlement with North Carolina on the route, said state Rep. Alan Clemmons, president of the S.C. I-73 Association.

Work on the leg between I-95 and the state line can't move forward until there is some agreement with North Carolina, Clemmons said.

Federal law requires that the area where the highway crosses the border be planned in a joint study but North Carolina has not yet agreed to participate, he said.

Highway backers are working on a mid-November meeting in Myrtle Beach with North Carolina's highway commissioners and agency staff, he said.

Agreement is important, even though some area businesses are satisfied that Myrtle Beach will get an interstate connection to I-95 and aren't as concerned with whether the rest of it is finished, Clemmons said.

“I need for everybody on this side of I-95 to understand that the real financial impact on South Carolina is going to result from I-73 coming in to South Carolina,” he said.

It's crucial for the highly populated Charlotte, N.C., area to have “quick and easy access to the beach,” he said.

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