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INTERSTATE 73 LOBBYING PUSH COMES TO MB David Klepper The Sun News

They don't know where it will go, exactly. And they don't know how we'll pay for it. But one thing about the proposed Interstate 73 is certain, officials say: It's about time.

Local officials, tourism leaders, state lawmakers and more than two dozen U.S. congressional staffers gathered in Myrtle Beach this weekend for an I-73 rally - a chance for all elected officials from all levels of government to talk about the road's plans and see the need firsthand.

Local leaders said that need should be obvious:

Myrtle Beach is the nation's most successful tourism destination without an interstate. As a drive-to destination, that's especially crippling. It's also one of the most heavily populated areas on the East Coast without an interstate hurricane evacuation route. Finally, if efforts to expand the area's economy are to work, an interstate is nearly a prerequisite.

"We want I-73. We need I-73," said Brad Dean, president of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce, on Friday at the I-73 town hall meeting, sponsored by WBTW News, Channel 13, and the chamber.

But designing the road and finding the estimated \$2 billion to pay for it remain obstacles. That's the reason for the road rally, officials said - to generate momentum for the project. A similar rally was held in February in Washington, D.C.

"We have to keep reinforcing our message," said S.C. Rep. Alan Clemmons, R-Myrtle Beach. "[Congressional staffers] are impressed with our commitment."

Local leaders say the lobbying is starting to pay off. I-73 was named the state Department of Transportation's highest-priority project and is one of five priority projects for the federal government.

Earlier this month, the U.S. House approved a bill that includes \$10 million for the road.

Another \$1 million has been set aside in the yet-to-be-approved state budget. U.S. Rep. Henry Brown already has secured \$5.5 million in federal money to be used in environmental-impact studies and road designs.

``All of those numbers mean one thing," Brown said, that local officials must continue to lobby for more funds from more sources at the state and federal government.

The environmental studies will help road engineers select the best route for the interstate, which is expected to travel to Myrtle Beach after entering the state somewhere near the border between Marlboro County and Richmond County, N.C. Other factors in selecting a route will be the cost of right-of-way acquisition, the size of nearby population centers and the existing road system.

Finally, once the designs are complete and the funding found, construction can begin. No one expects that to be within a decade.

``It's not a matter of `if' and `when,'" Dean said. ``It's a matter of how."Contact DAVID KLEPPER at dklepper@thesunnews.com or 626-0303.

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