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LEAN, MEAN FOR I-73

The transportation bill that the U.S. House took up Wednesday contains \$10 million toward Interstate 73 from Myrtle Beach to the S.C.-N.C. line near Cheraw. If this transportation earmark survives the legislative process, the Grand Strand's long-awaited interstate link will take a giant step toward becoming reality.

For that reason, local folks need to begin thinking about this critical highway in more specific terms. Right now, the S.C. Department of Transportation envisions five possible routes for the highway between Cheraw and the Grand Strand. Of these, three northerly routes could tie into a highway of near-interstate caliber that already exists - S.C. 22, the Conway Bypass. The other two routes the S.C. DOT envisions would take the highway into southern Horry County, where no ready link to the coast yet exists.

Supporters of the two southern routes no doubt envision the long-discussed U.S. 701 connector from Carolina Bays Parkway across the Waccamaw River as that missing link. There are two problems with this vision:

Although the House transportation bill contains \$5 million toward construction of the connector, it could be years before the feds and the state come up with enough money to fund that project fully.

As well, an S.C. DOT declaration of a southern route for I-73, with a connector link to the coast, would generate opposition from environmental groups over destruction of wetland - possibly tying up construction in court for years.

The better bet for an I-73 route is a northern route that links to S.C. 22 and its impressive, already built interchange with S.C. 31 near the waterway. From that point, visitors could fan out to Strand destinations. And a majority of the coastal Horry County population could get with relative ease to that interchange to escape inland when tropical storms threaten.

Because President Bush has deemed the House bill too costly, the amount appropriated for I-73 - if any money is appropriated at all - could be less than \$10 million. Lean and mean are to be the watchwords of this project, in short, so local business and political leaders would be wise to lobby S.C. DOT to select a northern route to ensure I-73 actually gets built.

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