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STATE OFFICIALS PUT HEADS TOGETHER OVER I-73 PROJECT

Tonya Root The Sun News

If state officials pledge to fund their part of the proposed Interstate 73 corridor, federal officials might make the project a higher priority and get the road built sooner, officials said Tuesday.

State officials agreed to consider a transportation funding package that would set aside 10 percent of the \$1.7 billion needed to build South Carolina's portion of the highway. The exact source for the funding remained unclear.

The road is proposed to run from Myrtle Beach to Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., and give the Grand Strand its first interstate highway connection. Officials promote the highway as a way to allow more tourism and economic growth, as well as better hurricane-evacuation access.

Officials from the S.C. Transportation Infrastructure Bank and the state Department of Transportation met jointly for the first time Tuesday at the Myrtle Beach Convention Center. They heard presentations on the progress of I-73, funding and the next step in the process for the high way project.

U.S. Rep. Henry Brown, R-Hanahan, said he hopes to get the corridor moved from No. 5 to No. 2 on the federal highway-funding priority list. A commitment from the State Transportation Infrastructure Bank to fund 10 percent of the project through South Carolina would be "the ace in the hole" to move it on the list, Brown said.

"It's hard to get funds for a road that doesn't exist," Brown said. "The federal government doesn't like to spend money without a plan."

State Rep. Alan Clemmons, president of the S.C. I-73 Association, said he wants to see a funding package come before him and legislators this year for approval.

A state 10 percent match would be "the slam dunk in Washington," Clemmons said. "It truly shows the willingness to cooperate and acquire federal funds so much easier."

He also suggested a private-public partnership to fund the highway project.

"The funding now is critical. We need to investigate every possibility that's out there to fund I-73," Clemmons said. "Opening up that corridor will bring in a great deal of business that we have been unable to tap."

No route has been selected for the highway because officials continue to study the 2,200 square miles of area in the proposed route, said Mitchell Metts, I-73 project manager for the S.C. Department of Transportation.

A final environmental-effect statement, which would narrow the study area and provide a proposed route, should be completed by December 2006, Metts said.

If approved, an environmental permit could be issued by February 2007 for work on the project. The next step would be to secure funding to purchase rights of way for the road, he said

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