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## WILL I-73 GET THE FUNDING IT DESERVES?

What a pity that of all the congressional initiatives on which President Bush could have imposed a veto-threat-backed spending limit, he picked the initiative that concerns Interstate 73 between Myrtle Beach and the N.C.-S.C. state line. Right now, it's looking as though negotiators trying to reconcile House and Senate versions of the new six-year federal transportation bill are settling on a compromise cost in the < br>\$285 billion to \$295 billion range - well above the \$256 billion cap that Bush has set, swearing he will go no higher.

Unless both houses of Congress can muster veto-proof two-thirds majorities, the House-Senate transportation conferees could cave in to pressure to scale down the cost of the transportation bill by \$29 billion to \$39 billion. If such trims happen, they could include the \$10 million set aside for I-73 in the House version of the bill.

However, as U.S. Rep. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., (who voted against the House bill) has noted, I-73 could still get some money if that happens. DeMint, a candidate this year to move up to the U.S. Senate, is joining other Southern representatives, including U.S. Rep. Henry Brown, R-S.C., in vying for a fairer split of the highway money among the states. The goal is a provision giving Southern states at least 95 percent of the federal highway money they send to Washington via taxes, which would be a huge advantage for South Carolina.

Previous omnibus transportation bills effectively take money coming from warm-weather states for highway projects in cold-weather states. If this Southern quest for a more favorable split is successful, a highway bill that comes in at the \$256 billion level still could contain construction money for I-73 - especially if DeMint, Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., (who voted against the Senate highway bill) and other S.C. legislators can convince the conferees that it's payback time for South Carolina. A good argument can be made that Congress has been shortchanging South Carolina in highway spending for decades.

There's one other scenario under which the project could get at least the House-allocated \$10 million, maybe more. If the bill comes in in the < br>\$285 billion to \$295 billion range, if both house override the expected Bush veto, and if the Southern quest for a fairer split is successful, Interstate 73 could get more than \$10 million. The cost of that original House bill was ``only" \$275 billion. Maybe that additional \$29 billion to \$39 billion would include a few million more for our project.

One final point local highway hopefuls should ponder: Whatever money Congress spits out for I-73 will buy down the total cost of the project by only a pittance. The S.C. Department of Transportation estimates the projected cost of an interstate-quality road from somewhere in Horry County to the N.C.-S.C. state line near Cheraw to be \$2 billion. Tolls, anyone?

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