

Department finishes plans for northern section of I-73

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S.C. Department of Transportation Leaders finalized plans Wednesday that will continue the northern section of Interstate 73.

S.C. Transportation Secretary H.B. "Buck" Limehouse Jr. signed the record of decision alongside S.C. Federal Highway Division Administrator Bob Lee, officially kicking off the funding plans for the interstate.

"It will open a part of the state that has not been served by an interstate highway ... everyone is excited," Limehouse said.

Lawmakers said the interstate will expand tourism and bring new jobs to the Palmetto State.

The interstate would run through Marlboro and Dillon counties, and leaders there said the record of decision signing is a big accomplishment for the area.

"This is real progress, and it shows that this progress is moving forward as scheduled," state Rep. Doug Jennings of Bennettsville said.

The Northern I-73 Project is 36 miles long and stretches from Interstate 95 in South Carolina to I-73/I-74 in the Rockingham/Hamlet, N.C., area.

Project leaders said they realize state lawmakers are working hard to fund South Carolina's multi-million dollar budget shortfall.

Leaders said they are looking at other avenues, including funding assistance from international public-private partnerships in Spain and Australia.

"They wanna know what the parameters are and how much they're gonna have to finance and how they're gonna pay for it," Limehouse said.

Leaders said the interstate, if completed, will cost close to \$2.4 billion for the South Carolina coverage. The interstate is likely to take at least a decade to complete.

The funding could be a mixture of federal, state and private-sector money, S.C. Department of Transportation Project Manager Mitchell Metts said in a previous interview. Some sections of the interstate could require tolls, he said, although the locations would depend on the tolling companies.

Leaders at Wednesday's event said funding from international companies for big projects like I-73 isn't uncommon and local companies will still help build the interstate.

"Most of the payroll will go to people from South Carolina because they will partner with the local people to get the job done," Limehouse said.

Interstate 73 ultimately will run from Myrtle Beach to Sault Ste. Marie, Mich.

In all, it will cross six states — Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia and the Carolinas — and traverse 60 miles in four Pee Dee counties.

Nearly 95 percent of tourists visit Myrtle Beach by car, and leaders said they feel I-73 would be a perfect fit for the rapidly-growing area.

"It'll be good for people from Michigan, Ohio and West Virginia ... to access them for golf and go to the beach and come down and spend money on their vacations," Limehouse said.

Businesses also will form along the route, Limehouse said, boosting the economy for all of South Carolina.

"I think that's probably the strongest and most important message we need to send," he said.

Project leaders said they made a strict commitment to get the project idea finalized in a little more than three years.

The Federal Highway Administration will award the Interstate-73 project team in Washington, D.C., on Nov. 5 for their environmental streamlining work.

The recommended preferred alternative for the northern portion of Interstate 73 in South Carolina was announced July 19, 2007. It begins south of Hamlet in Richmond County, N.C., and travels southeast toward the Carolinas' state line, parallel with S.C. 38 into Dillon County, where it connects with the southern portion west of Latta at Interstate 95.

The environmental impact statement related to the building of the southern portion of Interstate 73 was finalized Nov. 29 by state and federal officials. Finalizing the Environmental Impact Statement allowed for the process of acquiring right-of-ways to begin. The southern portion of the new interstate would run from Interstate 95 in Dillon County through Marion County to S.C. 22 (Veterans Highway) in Horry County.