

Dillon County I-73/I-95 interchange resolution approved

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The S.C. Department of Transportation Commission has approved a resolution to redirect available funds to purchase right-of-way and advance the permitting process for construction of the Interstate 73/Interstate 95 interchange in Dillon County — what has become known as the Interchange of Hope.

The interstate, from Myrtle Beach to Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., could take at least 10 years to complete. It would cross six states — Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia and the Carolinas — and traverse 80 miles in four South Carolina counties: Marlboro, Dillon, Marion and Horry. It also would be the first interstate link to Myrtle Beach, the heart of the state's \$16 billion tourism industry.

About \$60 million is available for this effort in addition to the \$10 million that will be redirected from the State Infrastructure Bank, according to an agreement between the State Infrastructure Bank and Horry County approved earlier this week.

On May 13, the North Eastern Strategic Alliance approved using stimulus funds to build a 6-mile stretch of I-73 from Interstate 95 to U.S. 501 in Dillon County. NESA is a regional economic development organization that serves nine counties: Chesterfield, Darlington, Dillon, Florence, Georgetown, Horry, Marion, Marlboro and Williamsburg. Its executive committee voted Feb. 13 to spend \$50,000 to coordinate efforts for securing stimulus money for building I-73.

"Commissioner (Danny) Isaac has made huge strides in securing the needed support to push I-73 forward," Brant Branham, Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce board chairman, said in a SCDOT press release. "(Thursday's) vote sends a clear signal to Washington that I-73 will be built sooner rather than later."

The commission's decision doesn't add new money to the project, but SCDOT officials said it offers the potential for starting construction earlier than expected if additional funds become available. Two opportunities exist to secure additional funds: a recently announced grant of \$1.5 billion from the U.S. Department of Transportation and the upcoming Highway Reauthorization Bill.

Isaac told Horry County Council on Wednesday a \$10 million federal stimulus grant can be used for work on the next part of the Carolina Bays Parkway. The \$10 million designated for the parkway can then be used to secure borrowing for I-73.

“We have made great progress, but moving forward on the interchange project will help us secure more federal funds and create jobs which our state desperately needs,” state Rep. Alan Clemmons, National I-73/74 Association chairman, said in the release.

A report from Coastal Carolina University released Jan. 29 estimates the project could have an impact of \$4.1 billion over a five-year timeline. The estimated cost to build the interstate is \$2.4 billion for the South Carolina part alone.

SCDOT officials originally had cost concerns about starting the project at the proposed interchange until federal lawmakers assured them they would put money for the project in the federal highway budget. The initial phase of the project falls in U.S. Rep. John Spratt’s district.

“Now is the time to position I-73 for increased investments by the federal government,” said state Rep. Tracy Edge, S.C. I-73/74 Association co-chairman. “(Thursday’s) move by the SCDOT affirms the importance of this project not just to the Grand Strand but to the entire state as well.”

The National I-73/74 Corridor Association bills itself as a membership organization committed to enhancing the economic success and quality of life within the six-state corridor by pursuing the planning, permitting, funding, construction and maintenance of I-73/74 — highways of regional and national significance that will facilitate interstate commerce, reduce congestion and improve safety in an environmentally sound manner.

For more information about I-73, visit <http://www.i73.com> or call (866) 924-7374.