

Tuesday, Jan. 27, 2009

## Race on for I-73 funds

### Area officials push to be shovel ready, top of projects list

By Jason M. Rodriguez - [jrodriguez@thesunnews.com](mailto:jrodriguez@thesunnews.com)

As federal officials hash out a stimulus package for “shovel-ready” roads nationwide, area politicians are working to get the Interstate 73 corridor project dug out from footnotes to the front line of the list of state road projects.

“I-73 is about jobs,” said Commissioner Danny Isaac of the S.C. Transportation Commission after a public meeting Monday. “It is my opinion that if I-73 is not shovel ready today, then we must do what we can to get it shovel ready as soon as possible.”

It was an opinion shared by city, county and state officials at Monday’s meeting.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act 2009 is an \$825 billion federal stimulus package for nationwide road projects that could be ready to build in 180 days.

Under the initial draft of the bill, projects needed to be ready to build within 90 days. Supporters of I-73, including Isaac, don’t think the project could be ready that quickly. Now that the timeframe has been extended to 180 days, Isaac and other proponents, including Rep. Doug Jennings, D-Marlboro, are on a public hearing and media blitz to get the word out that I-73 could be shovel ready by that deadline.

Jennings scheduled a meeting for Thursday to discuss the issue in Columbia.

Rep. Alan Clemmons, R-Myrtle Beach, said the S.C. Department of Transportation, the state’s congressional delegation and Gov. Mark Sanford need to make I-73 more of a priority.

“Today, I-73 is shown as a footnote,” Clemmons said after Monday’s meeting. “That footnote needs to rise to the top of the page. We have to take the I-73 project and consume it segment by segment.”

That part of the process could cause a stumbling block. Some prefer starting with the segment at the interchange at Interstate 95. Others believe the northwestern part of the road, a 36-mile stretch from I-95 near Latta to Hamlet, N.C., should come first.

Clemmons agreed with Isaac that a potential target for the initial work surrounding I-73 would include widening S.C. 22 to make it compliant with the interstate’s construction.

The project still needs some persuasion of state officials, including Sanford and Republican U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., who has said the road is not ready yet for stimulus funding, because the federal spending is aimed to start creating jobs immediately. Sanford has said he thinks the spending would leave future generations with expensive projects they have no say in.

Myrtle Beach Mayor John Rhodes said the city will continue to push the area’s delegates toward I-73.

“We understand how long it’s going to take to pay back the stimulus,” he said after the meeting. “So if you’re going to do the job as governor of this state, then go ahead and get the money for this state [now rather than later] because we’re going to have to pay it back anyway.”

Isaac said he knows how coveted the federal funds are and warned that if the state does not use half of the money it is allotted 120 days after the bills passes, it would lose those funds to other states.

“We don’t want to see [other states] get the highways we need because we were too slow to come around on this project,” he said, noting a recent study from Coastal Carolina University that says the construction would create about 7,700 jobs and \$1.2 billion in income. “This is critical to put people to work in the entire area.”