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How will S.C. DOT fund construction?

By Shep Guyton

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In a recent letter, S.C. Transportation Secretary Buck Limehouse takes issue with an editorial in The Sun News that questioned why Interstate 73 may not be included in the economic stimulus package likely to be passed by the Congress in the next few weeks. While making an incredible effort to reassure us that he has been a friend to the Grand Strand and remains supportive of I-73, Limehouse's response ("Projects important to Stand get consideration," Jan. 9) avoids the ultimate question asked, which only Secretary Limehouse can answer: If not with stimulus funds, how else can we fund I-73?

Limehouse makes it clear he does not want to build an "interchange to nowhere" [at Interstate 95 in Dillon County], yet it is understandable why local I-73 enthusiasts have made such a request. For decades, Horry County was ignored by state leaders who failed to reinvest in local infrastructure, despite the fact that the Grand Strand is a powerful economic engine for our state. The only way we were able to spur investment by the state was the building of the infamous "bridge to nowhere" [on what is now S.C. 22], a brainchild of then-DOT Commissioner Billy Alford. If it worked then, many assume it could work now.

But Limehouse's hesitancy to do so is understandable, as much scrutiny will be focused on the use of the stimulus funds. Yet if the S.C. DOT truly intends to build I-73, the interchange is an initial investment in what S.C. DOT has affirmed to be its top new road project. The only way it would become an interchange to nowhere is if the road is never built. So if we agree that I-73 will be built, the interchange could be an important first step.

But the most important issue is not about an interchange. It's not even about the stimulus package. The bigger issue is this: S.C. DOT declares I-73 to be a high priority but we have no plan on how to fund this project. Many sources have been mentioned: tolls, private financing, gas taxes, federal grants, etc. Perhaps I-73 enthusiasts would be less worried about securing stimulus funding if we knew how S.C. DOT plans to pay for the road.

Unfortunately, the only plan to date centers around the possibility of a public-private partnership. While that type of innovative financing might be required, this requires legislative action. Key congressional leaders appear hesitant to use such funding for national highways.

With Congress prepared to spend billions of dollars on infrastructure, we are justified in asking that the state's top new road project be included in the state's plans for stimulus funding. But that objective pales in comparison to the broader opportunity we have to position I-73 for future funds in subsequent congressional authorizations. There's never been a better time to do so.

If Gov. Sanford (to whom Limehouse reports) truly supports I-73, as he has stated many times, he can rely upon two influential local leaders to assist him in making this a reality: Danny Isaac, our current S.C. DOT commissioner, and Don Leonard, chairman of the State Infrastructure Bank.

Who better to assist Secretary Limehouse in assembling an I-73 funding plan than two longtime local leaders who know and understand the importance of investing in our infrastructure?

Much progress has been made in recent years on I-73.

But we must seek continued progress if this important project is to become a reality.

With Congress preparing to make an unprecedented investment in our nation's infrastructure, there has never been a better time to begin I-73.

The writer, a businessman, lives in Myrtle Beach.