

Tolls will likely be needed to build portions of I-73 in South Carolina

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Portions of a future interstate that ranks high on the federal wish list will most likely be tolled, South Carolina officials said this week as they finalized plans for a 36-mile portion of the route.

South Carolina Department of Transportation officials announced Wednesday, Oct. 22, that they have finalized plans for a 36-mile portion of Interstate 73 that will connect Interstate 95 in South Carolina with I-73/I-74 in Rockingham, NC.

Officials say I-73 will eventually connect Myrtle Beach, SC, to northern Michigan via North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia and Ohio.

Funding remains a major part of the discussion as state and federal highway budgets continue to feel the effects of Americans driving fewer miles and contributing less in fuel taxes.

Officials aren't ruling out public-private partnerships for I-73. Public-private partnerships for roadways are those that authorize a private investor to build, maintain and operate a project as a toll road. Tolling agreements could last decades.

The Federal Highway Administration has placed I-73 in the top five projects of national significance, and officials acknowledge that tolling could play a major role in bringing it to fruition.

Highway users understand that funding is running short but remain skeptical of tolling proposals for interstate highways, new or existing.

"My opinion is that the I-73 project is something that all politicians have agreed to as something that will be funded by nothing short of the toll road method," trucker and OOIDA member Tim Houghtaling of Lexington, SC, told Land Line Magazine.

Houghtaling said he frequently communicates with his elected representatives on important issues such as this.

"All have told me how terribly opposed they are to conversion of existing freeways to toll ways," he said. "All have told me how I-73 and other such new 'free' ways are different and that funding can only be completed by toll roads."

Houghtaling said he has found straight answers from lawmakers are hard to come by as officials continue to believe that it's cheaper for private investors to fund roads and make profits than it is to pay for roads with traditional fuel tax funds.

“The politicians and business groups have worked long and hard to have a roadway that can bring Michiganders south for their mid-winter breaks at amusement places and golf courses,” Houghtaling said.

“They have no concern of costs to local area workers forced to use the toll roads. They have no say. It will happen regardless of whether it is economically pragmatic or ‘the right thing.’ ”

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