

Monday, May 28, 2007

### \$9.5 Million Earmarked for Leg of I-73

A budget entry on a draft roads plan marks money to be used for work around Martinsville.

By Jeff Sturgeon - The Martinsville Bulletin

State road officials have written \$9.5 million into a newly released draft budget toward building a 3.6-mile leg of proposed Interstate 73 near Martinsville.

The budget entry in a draft Six-Year Improvement Program released Tuesday indicates that I-73 is inching closer to reality, offering a limited-access road between the Roanoke Valley and North Carolina with an estimated price tag of \$4.3 billion.

There is still no guarantee from the Virginia Department of Transportation and budget-writing Commonwealth Transportation Board to pour asphalt on a particular date. However, the document mentions 2011 for construction to start. The spending plan is due to be finalized by July 1, after which a more concrete picture could emerge.

The project has one thing going for it that it didn't have a year ago, when funding also showed up in the state highway budget. The federal government in April signed off on an environmental review, which authorizes engineers to begin design. Purchases of land and a starting date for construction depend on design.

The proposed funding of \$9.5 million for the Martinsville leg is not the entire 3.6 miles, but rather the proposed allocation for the coming six years.

"It seems like an awful small amount of money," said Benny Summerlin, Henry County administrator.

The draft budget also lists \$2.8 million for pre-construction work on the Roanoke end of the I-73 project.

Adding to the uncertainty, some Martinsville-area leaders are debating whether the chosen route for I-73 in the south side of the state is the right one.

Tuesday, VDOT plans to brief the Henry County Board of Supervisors at the board's request on where the project stands and on how much time and expense changing the proposed route would add at this late stage.

"To go back and revisit it now ... is definitely going to take time and work," said Jason Bond, spokesman for VDOT. The Commonwealth Transportation Board has the power to order such a revisit, Bond said.

Last month, authorities marked the end of studies that took about 10 years to choose the current route for I-73, which is seen as a major improvement over the existing north-south route, U.S. 220.

The concept for the road goes back to 1993.

The section of I-73 that would run through downtown Roanoke is supposed to follow the alignment of Interstate 581. Designers will begin making such calls as whether I-73 will be wider than I-581, which has three lanes in each direction.

South of the Roanoke Valley in the Clearbrook neighborhood, I-73 is expected to form a new road east of U.S. 220 in most places all the way down to south of Ridgeway.

Around Martinsville, officials are debating whether the road should be rerouted to pass beside the Patriot Centre industrial park and connect to the existing Martinsville bypass. Skip Ressel, a businessman and advocate for that route adjustment, said he thinks such a change might add a year to the timeline and little if anything to the cost, while resulting in a road capable of yielding more benefits to industry.