

Sun News, The (Myrtle Beach, SC)
December 15, 2006
Section: MONOP
Page: A10

I-73 IMPORTANT TO RESIDENTS, VISITORS, ECONOMY Alan Clemmons

Re Dana Beach's Dec. 5 letter, "S.C. agency steers road funds to boondoggles":

The executive director of the Coastal Conservation League criticizes the S.C. Department of Transportation for, among other things, its support of and leadership on Interstate 73. This citing of an important project such as I-73 to attack the DOT is unfortunate. Yet the writer levies accusations and assumptions that are misleading.

The writer claims the roads in our area are "lightly traveled." Try explaining that misstatement to those who travel U.S. 501 each day during the summer. Better yet, try explaining that to residents of Carolina Forest, who desperately seek relief from the traffic congestion in and around their U.S. 501 intersection. Though the population in northeastern South Carolina may be less than that of the urban areas of our state, suggesting that our roads are lightly traveled is laughable. The writer should travel along U.S. 501 any given summer day, when hundreds of thousands of tourists travel to and from the Grand Strand. By connecting S.C. 22 to Interstate 95 [as I-73 would do], the state would allow many visitors to choose the direct interstate access instead of traveling on U.S. 501, relieving much of the congestion we see today.

The writer criticizes the DOT for working with its counterpart in North Carolina to collaborate on Interstate 74, suggesting these two interstates are duplicative and unnecessary. While South Carolina sees I-73 as a top priority, North Carolina prefers I-74 because it connects its coastal region to states that are not in the I-73 corridor. When complete, I-74 will lie just a few miles from Carolina Bays Parkway (S.C. 31). Should the DOT ignore the plans of our neighbor to the north, knowing we will need only a few miles of highway to take full advantage of North Carolina's road-building efforts? Of course not. Focusing on I-73, our top priority, while planning to take full advantage of North Carolina's road-building efforts demonstrates long-term vision and good judgment.

The writer alleges that the DOT uses no system for objectively analyzing the benefits of a transportation project, ignoring the fact that this corridor was designated by the federal government as one of "high priority with national and regional significance." Apparently, in his view, this designation and the many meetings with residents, businesses, legislators, federal highway planners and various associations, including that which he represents, are not worthy of consideration. The DOT has closely studied this project and allowed for a fair, open and inclusive process to maximize the benefits to our state.

What benefits will I-73 bring? Recent studies published by the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce demonstrate that interstate access to the Grand Strand is the top

need of tourists, as identified by both those who visit here and those who choose to travel elsewhere. I-73 will also provide an alternate escape route from the coast to I-95 during a hurricane. If the writer were to experience a mandatory evacuation when our area is threatened with a major hurricane, perhaps he would realize I-73 may someday save lives.

But I-73 is not simply a road for the coast. Both sections - north and south of I-95 - must be built. This will spur economic development in a region of the state that desperately needs new industry and more jobs. The most recent unemployment statistics average

10.4 percent in Marion, Marlboro and Dillon counties, as compared to the national average of 4.4 percent.

The nation's interstate system has proven to be an important economic development force, creating millions of jobs both during and after construction of interstate highways. Until now, our region of the state has been left out, but that will soon change. I-73 will be funded through state and federal transportation funding and tolls paid by tourists. In a state filled with many infrastructure needs, we can be thankful the DOT has established I-73 as its top new road project.

Finally, the writer suggests I-73 is a "politically driven boondoggle" that does not serve public needs but, rather, special interests. Try explaining that to the millions of tourists who demand easier access. Or to the residents who plead for less congestion on their roadways. Or to the unemployed in neighboring counties. A recent poll conducted by the current Leadership Grand Strand class indicates voters throughout Horry County overwhelmingly support I-73 and rank it as a high priority. On behalf of those residents and business who value interstate access for our area, I-73 is an important public need that is not driven by special interests but by the best interests of our state. The writer would do well to avoid ill-informed assumptions and misguided notions. I invite him to join us in championing the cause of the state's No. 1 new road project. Rather than attack the DOT for addressing the needs of our state, we should applaud its leadership on this project and support their efforts to make I-73 a reality.

The writer, of Myrtle Beach, represents District 107 in the S.C. House and is president of the I-73 Association.

