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Page: A1

A ROUTE AT LAST
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COLUMBIA

The final preferred route for Interstate 73's southern leg has the least impact on wetland, farmland and communities of any other alternative, highway planners said Tuesday.

"It's not a direct impact to any community," said Mitchell Metts, I-73 project manager for the state Department of Transportation.

Metts said that in two years of public hearings, community meetings and written comments, "the predominant voice we heard" was to avoid communities and farms as much as possible.

Planners and the state and federal Departments of Transportation revealed the proposed location at an event attended by a few residents and public officials of the affected area as well as most of the legislators from the region and agency workers who have been involved in the project.

Supporters hailed the event as an important milestone in the development of the road that will be the first interstate highway connection to the largest tourism destination that does not have one. Tourism leaders say more than 90 percent of visitors to the Myrtle Beach area arrive by car.

Officials at the event also noted the size of the \$2 billion undertaking, which S.C. DOT Director Betty Mabry promised two years ago to finish in 10 years.

"This is the largest public works project ever done in the state of South Carolina," said Patrick Tyndall, I-73 project manager for the federal DOT. "It's unprecedented in a number of different ways."

But how to pay to build the highway is still unknown.

Along the preferred route near Rabon's Corner, Burnie Rabon, who owns 26 acres of farmland off Valley Forge Road, was not pleased to hear the route will come close to his property, if not through it.

"I think they should take it through one of the crossroads and not split people's farms up," Rabon said. "We've lived here and farmed here, what else do we have?"

The 60-mile preferred path meets S.C. 22, also known as Veterans Highway, between U.S. 701 and S.C. 319, then skirts through the countryside to avoid most existing houses.

It joins S.C. 917 near Ketchuptown and uses the existing bridge area to cross the Little Pee Dee River at a state Heritage Trust Preserve so as to avoid further disturbance to the preserved land.

The path then brushes to the south of Mullins and Latta to join I-95 about five miles south of Dillon.

Tyndall said the two-year process of involving the public, community groups and state and federal agencies worked and produced a practical plan.

“There is no wizard who just sits behind a green curtain at DOT and decides where all the roads are going to go,” Tyndall said.

Brad Dean, president of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce, said the chosen path is “a great decision because it will likely minimize the impact on people and property, which will expedite the process.”

Still time for changes

The planners stress that there is still room to tweak the road's corridor to avoid as many problems as possible.

“We're not through changing it,” Metts said. In upcoming public hearings, “we anticipate finding some information that we didn't know was there.”

Public hearings will be June 15 at Aynor High School, June 20 at Marion County Technical Education Center and June 22 at Dillon High School. All are 4-7 p.m.

After the announcement, state and federal DOT officials signed a document that contains the preferred path as well as all the reasoning for its selection.

The document is called a Draft Environmental Impact Statement. It will be available on the I-73 Web site, www.i73insc.com, and in the public libraries in Horry, Marion and Dillon counties.

Metts said the final impact statement should be finished next spring, after the public hearings and refinements of the path.

The proposed interstate route produced little objection at the meeting.

State Rep. Nelson Hardwick, R-Surfside Beach, who wanted the road to go farther south along U.S. 378 and did not want to see it slash through farms in his home community of Cool Spring, said he was not sure what to think without studying the map further.

It did appear to minimize the effect on farms and on the Aynor school attendance area, Hardwick said.

Complaints from Hardwick and others a year ago resulted in changes in the proposed lines that moved them north of Cool Springs.

Metts said 1,708 acres of farmland is affected by the proposed route.

“All the farms pretty much got saved,” said Rep. Jackie Hayes, D-Hamer, while looking over the route's affect on Dillon County.

Could have been worse

Bunny Beeson, director of Mullins-based Wildlife Action, said the path could have been worse.

“I think they did a wonderful job of trying to get the best for everybody,” he said. “It is going through Heritage Trust land and that concerns me.”

Nancy Cave, north coast director for the Coastal Conservation League, also said the path is not as destructive as it could have been, though her organization is concerned about the effect of structures such as the interchanges on rural communities.

The league also wants to ensure that the compensation is adequate for the 384 acres of wetland impacted by the route.

Federal law requires compensation, usually by preserving similar acreage elsewhere.

Members of the Holliday family who were worried about a proposed route through their hometown of Galivants Ferry were relieved and grateful.

“They've been working on this for so long,” said Christy Holliday Douglas, who has followed the process and been to most of the public hearings. “They've done an incredible job. They had criteria to go by and they've done their homework extremely well. This was not an easy job and I respect their decision.”

State Rep. Alan Clemmons, R-Myrtle Beach, is president of the S.C. I-73 Association. He said he is excited to see a route that “shares the least amount of wetland impacts with the least amount of farm impacts with the lowest costs.”

A question of money

The next concern is how to pay for the road, Clemmons said.

Legislators passed a law designating I-73 as a toll road but it is not yet known how much money that would bring in.

With some of the planning out of the way, "we find ourselves in a new challenge," said U.S. Rep. Henry Brown, R-S.C., who got the highway its first \$3 million in federal money for planning three years ago.

Brown said he was "just overwhelmed" to see how far I-73 has come in a few years.

The state DOT will begin in about a month trying to find out how to fund the road.

The agency will issue requests for proposals for joint public-private partnerships to build the road, Metts said. He said he isn't sure what will come of the attempt, but that the agency may turn up some exciting proposals to help build the road.

Dean said the concept is interesting and exciting, "a bold move by DOT that signals they're ready to get this project moving as soon as possible."

Preliminary proposed routes for the 30-mile link between I-95 and Rockingham, N.C., are expected in July.

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