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Page: A1
Column:PROPOSED PATHS

A ROUTE FULL OF SPEED BUMPS

Zane Wilson The Sun News

Two million vehicles a year rumble over the 2.8-mile International Bridge that connects Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., with Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario.

Beneath the bridge, huge ships crunch into the locks that will carry them over the rapids between Lake Superior and Lake Huron.

It is at this crossroad of international traffic, trade and commerce where Interstate 73 will begin - or end, depending on your perspective.

I-73, currently in the planning stage for a route in South Carolina, is designated to connect Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., and Myrtle Beach.

The road was designated in 1991, but so far, little of it has been built. North Carolina is the only state that has built part of the road, and South Carolina is working on a route for its 60-mile portion.

The \$2 billion S.C. section is slated to be open by 2014. When, and if, the rest of it ever is finished is still an open question.

But if the road is available, people who live in Virginia, West Virginia and Ohio said they would come to Myrtle Beach, and come more often.

"I'm definitely for that. It's a 12-hour hop right now," said Gert Young, a frequent visitor to Myrtle Beach who is the manager of Ivy's Home and Garden store in historical downtown Chillicothe, Ohio.

"If there was an interstate, I would go more, and more people would probably want to go," Young said.

Neither she nor her assistant, Charlotte Spahrs, had ever heard of I-73. Spahrs said the road would be good for local use if it existed because it would be a better connection to Columbus, the capital.

Staffers at the Convention and Visitors Bureau in Chillicothe said they had never heard of I-73 either.

That's because Ohio never took any action to develop the road after preliminary studies in the early 1990s drew swift and strong opposition from farmers in the lush growing areas of central Ohio that the route would take.

Uncertainty and expectation

I-73 through Ohio was designated to generally follow the route of U.S. 23 from Toledo on the north border to Portsmouth on the south border, then jog east on U.S. 52 to Huntington, W.Va.

Almost all of that corridor is four lanes wide and some of it has limited access, but for most of its length it is similar to U.S. 501, with driveway connections and stoplights.

Travelers to Myrtle Beach from Ohio who want a quicker route usually take I-77 to Charlotte or I-75 to Asheville, N.C., then I-26 toward Charleston.

The I-75 to I-26 connection makes it easier and more attractive for them to get to Hilton Head Island than to Myrtle Beach, said Jim Geisert, a Toledo native who was visiting his hometown but now lives in Lexington, Ky.

Geisert and his wife, Robin Geisert, were celebrating their 36th anniversary with lunch at Tony Packo's, a renowned downtown Toledo restaurant that gained fame when Jamie Farr, "Klinger" on the TV show M.A.S.H., arranged to have the eatery's hot dogs delivered to Korea.

The Geiserts said they would welcome a new connection to Myrtle Beach because there is not a good one available now.

"It's getting through the mountains is the hard part," Jim Geisert said.

But Dave and Melissa Coughlan, visiting Toledo from Detroit, said it's too far to drive. The couple, toting two small children, said they flew when they visited Myrtle Beach. They would like to come again, but if they do, they will fly, they said.

Questions about I-73 in Michigan drew even more blank looks.

Michigan also has no plans to build I-73, though much of the designated corridor is already interstate or almost the same quality as an interstate, with limited access.

In Michigan, I-73 was to take the path of existing I-75 from Sault Ste. Marie to near Grayling, where the road would follow U.S. 127 to Jackson and U.S. 223 to Toledo.

Almost all of U.S. 127 between Grayling and Jackson is interstate quality. Travelers could then take I-94 east to Ann Arbor then turn south on U.S. 23 to Toledo for a faster ride.

Michigan and Ohio offer a variety of interstates and interstate-quality roads for travelers headed south, and visitors such as Young said if the Carolinas and Virginias build their part of I-73, it will make a big difference.

West Virginia is working on its part of the road. It has designated a corridor that roughly follows the path of U.S. 52. To be called King Coal Highway, it has been in the planning stages for years and would make a faster path across the state's southern mountains than is currently available.

Travelers from Ohio and Michigan can use I-77, which for part of its path in West Virginia is a toll road. It costs \$3.75 for the entire length.

But residents along U.S. 52 eagerly await the coming of I-73. U.S. 52 through West Virginia is a narrow, winding, crumbling mountain highway with no shoulders and no room for error, and it is heavily traveled by large trucks.

Tiffany and Greg Blankenship of Hanover, W.Va., interviewed at a grocery store in Justice W.Va., said they have been hearing about the King Coal Highway for years and just want it built.

“They're taking too long!” Tiffany Blankenship said. She said she would like to go to Myrtle Beach but is more interested in having faster, safer travel for herself and her family in her own area.

It takes at least an hour and a half to get to Charleston, W.Va., from their home, and usually an hour more, she said. The new road would make it a half-hour ride.

“It's a long and winding road from here to Myrtle Beach,” Greg Blankenship said. He said his grandmother owns a condominium in Myrtle Beach and that she makes the trip often. She has invited them to visit, but they don't want to go because of the long drive, he said.

Greg Blankenship said King Coal Highway also would be important for West Virginia's tourism. The road runs both ways, he said, and he would like to see tourists from Myrtle Beach come to his area to enjoy the all-terrain vehicle trails the state has developed.

The start of progress

In Virginia, the state voted in May to build its part of I-73 between Roanoke and the N.C. state line. The path roughly follows the route of U.S. 220.

Most of the rest of I-73 in Virginia is already there, though not officially designated yet. It would follow existing I-77 from Bluefield, W.Va., to Wytheville, Va., where it would then follow I-81 north to Roanoke before heading south again.

At a convenience store on U.S. 220 near Martinsville, Va., the owner said he is anxious to have I-73.

``Because it's easier for the people, good to get to Myrtle Beach and all the way to Ohio," said Imtiaz Khan. He said he and his family vacation in Myrtle Beach every year and they would enjoy an easier route. They might come more if I-73 were available, he said.

Khan said he would not object if the road took his property. He would use the money and build a new store at a nearby exit.

Store customer Lawrence Graves, a resident of Raleigh, N.C., who came to buy Virginia lottery tickets, said I-73 would help his area as much as it would help Myrtle Beach.

``It would provide easier access to our furniture markets, to our businesses and other industries in our area," Graves said. ``Anywhere there is easy access from distant places to the ocean is going to improve commerce."

Improving commerce is one of the reasons Congress OK'd I-73 and 44 other new interstate paths in 1991, calling them ``corridors of national significance, economic growth, and international or interregional trade."

But I-73 is not the only one that is far from being finished. Since the 1991 designations, only four projects have been completed.

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Illustration: On map titled: Several roads, one interstate?

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