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Agencies set price for I-73 crossing

By Zane Wilson - The Sun News

Two state agencies on Wednesday confirmed an agreement on compensation for the planned Interstate 73 crossing of a state preserve.

With a little push from the governor's office, the state Department of Transportation and Department of Natural Resources agreed on a price of \$2,500 an acre for 300 acres of comparable land.

An agreement on the Little Pee Dee River Heritage Trust Preserve crossing adjacent to S.C. 917 at the Horry-Marion County line is the last piece of the puzzle for DOT to apply for the federal permit for the 30-mile section of I-73 between S.C. 22 and I-95.

"I think everybody's going to be pleased that it was resolved," said Tom Davis, chief of staff for Gov. Mark Sanford. "It is a very critical objective to get I-73 done as quickly as possible."

"We're obviously thrilled and view this as a win-win for all involved," said Brad Dean, president of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce.

But some have doubts.

"The devil is going to be in the details," said David Farren, an attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center who has followed the I-73 project since its beginnings.

In May, the DOT offered \$450,000, or \$1,500 an acre, but the DNR said that was not enough. Negotiations stalled for over three months, causing some legislators to accuse the DNR of holding up the project.

Davis said the governor's office got involved last week when John Frampton, DNR director, called him to ask for help. He got Frampton's view on the issue, then talked to Transportation Secretary Buck Limehouse, Davis said.

Davis said he researched the issues over the weekend, discussed the matter with the governor and on Tuesday he brought Frampton and Limehouse together to try to reach an agreement.

The two agencies had already agreed that the 30 acres of the preserve that will be taken by the bridge project should be replaced tenfold, by 300 acres.

He said the 10-1 ratio was chosen because it was used in similar situations in other parts of the country, which makes it "a defensible mitigation ratio" if someone challenges whether the preserve intrusion was fairly compensated, Davis said.

Some legislators said they did not think the public should pay twice for the land, but Davis said S.C. law on heritage preserves requires that payment or a comparable land exchange be made. The state could not simply take the property, even though public money bought it in the first place, he said.

The money for the crossing will come from I-73 project funds meant for buying right of way, Limehouse said.

Frampton said DNR will look for comparable land in the region.

The Heritage Trust board must approve the deal, as must the state Budget and Control Board.

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