

Agreement reached on I-73, Heritage Preserve issue

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The S.C. Department of Natural Resources has informally agreed to a deal that will allow for the application of federal permits so the proposed Interstate 73 can cross over a section of Little Pee Dee River.

The compromise, reached Aug. 24, will result in the DNR Heritage Preserve Trust relinquishing 30 acres it controls to the S.C. Department of Transportation.

Under the terms of the deal, the Heritage Preserve Trust will receive \$2,500 an acre for 300 acres as replacement for the 30 acres of the Little Pee Dee River Heritage Preserve that will be used for the crossing of I-73 at S.C. 917 on the Marion-Horry county line.

Once the deal for the 30 acres along the river is finalized, the SCDOT can apply for the federal permit for the 30-mile section of I-73 scheduled to be built between Interstate 95 and S.C. 22.

"It's a 10-1 ratio, and that should be reasonable to everybody," John Frampton, DNR director, said.

The DNR was motivated because I-73 is a significant project and a benefit to the state, Frampton said.

Some formalities, including approval from the state's Budget and Control Board, must be settled before the agreement is finalized.

Frampton said he expects DNR's formal approval of the deal at its Sept. 28 meeting, and the Budget and Control Board should vote on the deal about two months after that. The Heritage Trust Board also will vote on it in September.

The deal also has to survive legal challenges from preservation and conservation groups that might not be satisfied with the agreement.

Frampton said he requested help from Gov. Mark Sanford's office in putting together a deal. Frampton said the DNR has been accused of slowing down the progress of I-73 plans because of the amount of time it has taken for an agreement over the property on Little Pee Dee.

The DNR has balked at deals previous to the one reached Aug. 24, but Frampton said the DNR has been vigilant and that takes time.

"Lands in the public trust are most important. This is especially environmentally-sensitive land, so it is imperative that we do a full evaluation," he said.

Frampton also said the Heritage Trust has spent time looking at other lands to acquire in place of the land it is relinquishing on Little Pee Dee.

Rep. Jim Battle, D-Nichols, who has expressed frustration with the amount of time the deal has taken, said he is pleased there is an agreement.

"I'm happy DNR and the DOT could get together and come up with a fair and equitable deal," Battle said.

Frampton said he hopes land can be found in the Pee Dee and Waccamaw rivers basin in place of the land the Trust is losing.

If built, I-73 will cross six states and four South Carolina counties and connect Myrtle Beach to Michigan.

The interstate could take as many as 10 years to build and cost \$2 billion. So far, about \$100 million has been earmarked to fund I-73.