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## BIG STEP FOR I-73

Interstate 73 took a move closer to reality last week when U.S. Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., promised that the project would obtain designation as a highway of national significance. As chairman of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, Inhofe has the authority to make such a designation. Better still, the designation qualifies the project for a federal funding ``kiss" every year.

Just as S.C. Rep. Tom Keegan, R-Surfside Beach, noted Friday during an Inhofe stopover at Myrtle Beach International Airport, ``This is really, really big." The S.C. portion of I-73 already stood a good chance of < br>\$20 million in initial funding because the House had included that amount in its version of the six-year bill to reauthorize federal transportation spending. Chances were strong that the House-Senate conference committee writing the final \$299 billion bill would leave that \$20 million intact. Until Inhofe came to town at the invitation of GOP Senate candidate Jim DeMint of Greenville, it was unclear where the rest of the money for I-73 would come from.

Inhofe's significant-highway designation promise provides part of the answer, though the senator didn't say how much permanent funding would flow to the project each year. But the designation also leverages state matches for the project.

And if those funding streams are insufficient to pay the road's total cost, the transportation bill likely will authorize the states to make up any differences with tolls.

We'll see how all this plays out. For now, it's enough that the I-73 project, only a dream two years ago, now stands at the threshold of tangibility.

Were it not for the fact that the federal portion of the project's costs will be absorbed into annual federal deficits for years to come, our jubilation would be complete. But as long as the Republican Congress is spending big money on highway projects across the country, it is appropriate that some of it be spent here.

DeMint deserves thanks for arranging the Inhofe visit.

This helps alleviate local doubts that the candidate wants the Grand Strand's link with the inland interstate complex to happen.

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