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SENATORS QUESTION MIDSTATE LOCATION

Bill would stop welcome centers
Plans for 2 in Randolph County have key legislator `disturbed'

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RALEIGH --State lawmakers moved toward downscaling or possibly halting plans for two highway welcome centers in Randolph County on Wednesday, questioning both their cost and location in the middle of the state.

"I'm really very disturbed by the creation of these," said Sen. David Weinstein, a Lumberton Democrat and co-chairman of an appropriations committee examining the welcome centers. The plazas are planned for both sides of Interstate 73/74 just north of the Montgomery County line.

Weinstein has drafted legislation to prevent their construction, estimated to cost \$1 million, and require future welcome centers be approved by the committee. The centers cost \$180,000 each per year to operate.

Both Republicans and Democrats expressed reservations about the centers, which would be the first not located on the state line and the first time two were placed in the same county, information first reported in the Observer on Wednesday.

The project began under the Department of Transportation in 1998 as two rest areas, standard construction on a new interstate. Local officials, however, asked to upgrade to visitors centers, which receive state funding but are operated by local tourism organizations.

The state board of travel and tourism later passed a resolution calling for hospitality centers on interstates to be classified as welcome centers -- funded and operated by the state to promote the entire state. Transportation officials obliged, and architects are now designing the buildings.