

Board seeks advice

On I-73, connector

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By BULLETIN STAFF REPORTS –
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The area's Commonwealth Transportation Board member said Friday the only way he will consider bringing a proposed route change for Interstate 73 to the CTB is if the Henry County Board of Supervisors requests it.

CTB member Dana Martin of Roanoke said he has talked to Henry County businessman Max Kendall about his proposal for changing the route of I-73, but "in order for me to be willing to bring that up," he would have to have a supervisors' request.

"Henry County is the primary entity involved," he said.

Martin said he expects to attend a supervisors' meeting in November.

Supervisors Chairman H.G. Vaughn of Ridgeway said he asked Martin to attend the November meeting to answer questions about a proposed connector between the U.S. 220/U.S. 58 Bypass and the Patriot Centre. Last week, that supervisors agreed to ask the CTB for the connector, which they hope eventually could become part of I-73, they said Tuesday.

Vaughn said he also wants to clear up with Martin questions from a group of businessmen who spoke about the project at Tuesday's board of supervisors meeting and provided information that contradicted the firm "any change to I-73 will delay the project" line that VDOT has given the board.

Currently, I-73 is proposed to run east of Martinsville. Kendall has proposed a different route that would run from the Martinsville Speedway to the Patriot Centre. It would use parts of the existing U.S. 220/U.S. 58 bypass.

The supervisors have been told by Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) that now that a record of decision has been reached by the federal government approving environmental testing for I-73, any change to the route would require starting the process over and jeopardize the whole project.

Kendall, however, has argued that his route, using existing roads, would be so much faster to build so it would offset any delay caused by new studies.

“My recommendation to Henry County is to not do anything that’s going to imperil the entire project,” Martin said.

However, he admitted that Kendall’s route “seems logical” on the surface. He said a more in-depth study would have to be done to see if it would indeed be better.

The question, he said, is whether the delay to the project really would be offset by quicker construction and whether the delay would open the project to attack from people who oppose it. As it is, I-73 is essentially on hold until a lawsuit from opponents is settled.

“My gut feeling is that simply asking (to consider a route change) is not going to imperil it,” Martin said. If the supervisors asked, he said, the CTB would consider the implications of any route change carefully and would not vote to approve anything that would endanger the project.

Martin said before he gives any advice to the supervisors, however, he will do further study to make sure his opinions are accurate based on Virginia Department of Transportation codes, regulations and precedents.

He said he did not want to come to a meeting and tell them “yes or no on things” if he is not sure of them.

Vaughn said what the board wants from Martin now is more information on the connector that was called “the best of both worlds” at Tuesday’s supervisors’ meeting. Vaughn said he wants to find out how to get the connector built as quickly as possible.

Speed is vital, he said, because the county is buying an additional 1,200 acres for the Patriot Centre, and I-73 could be decades away. When the four-laning of U.S. 58 is finished across Southside Virginia, he said, the connector could give the Patriot Centre a four-lane route all the way to I-77 and beyond.

The logical thing would be to build the connector to interstate standards and ask for it to be incorporated into I-73 at a later date, he said.

Vaughn said the board wants to determine if federal money for I-73 could be used for the connector because of the intention of eventually making it part of the interstate. As a federally funded project, 90 percent of the cost would be reimbursed by the U.S. government. As a state project, the connector would have to fight with other priorities in Virginia.

“We don’t want to jeopardize any money that might go to 58,” Vaughn said.

Proposing one big change to the route of I-73 now might jeopardize the interstate, Vaughn said, but he does not believe the connector will. He said going the connector

route also may cut down on red tape because there would be no federal record of decision needed to build it.

The businessmen who addressed the board Tuesday, some of whom are with companies in the Patriot Centre, said they would rather see a route similar to Kendall's and asked the board to request that from the CTB.

Some of those businessmen said Friday they believe the connector is a good idea, and they want to see if it can be incorporated into I-73.

Jay Edelen, vice president of J.G. Edelen, said the loosely organized group does not feel considering a new route for I-73 would kill the project, and in fact a more efficient route might speed it up.

He said that perhaps engineering and planning for the connector could be done in conjunction with planning for I-73.

The important thing, he said, is having an interstate route that directly serves two of the area's largest industrial assets.

"We feel like there has been lot investment already made in Patriot Centre and Martinsville Industrial Park," Edelen said. Those investments and the Martinsville Speedway would be better served if they had "direct and nearby interstate access."

"They are healthy, functioning, existing industrial parks which are extremely important part of our local economic infrastructure and they deserve to be served," he added.

Edelen said the feeling of the group is that "we only have one chance in history to get this route correct and think the current VDOT route will not be beneficial to the local community.

"We cannot operate based on fear," he said. "We feel like it's worth fighting for to get the route correct the first time even if it means will cause some small delay."

Edelen said his group is seeking others who support its views. They may reach him at 632-9750.

Allen Bowles with the Stanley Bowles Corp. also said he was fine with the connector, and he wants it to be part of I-73 to benefit existing businesses.

Bill Martin, president of Blue Ridge Aquaculture, said he and most business people support Kendall's route.

However, he also supports constructing the connector route and then making it part of I-73.

“Everyone is on the same wavelength,” Martin said. “The connector suits everyone here.”

Fifth District U.S. Rep. Virgil Goode, R., Rocky Mount, said “I’m not getting into” debates about which route I-73 should take.

“I just want I-73 to come to our area and I just want it to begin in Henry County,” he said.

Goode said he would have to hear more from VDOT to decide if it would slow the process down.