

Board approves compensation package for I-73 construction

Thursday, Aug 02, 2007 - 05:08 PM

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SCNOW.com

The S.C. Heritage Trust Advisory Board approved a compensation package today for the impact of the proposed Interstate 73 on the Little Pee Dee River.

Plans are for part of the 30-mile southern leg of I-73 in South Carolina to cross the Little Pee Dee River. The I-73 path is slated to run parallel to the S.C. 917 bridge on the border of Marion and Horry counties before it connects to S.C. 22 near Aynor.

The interstate would impact 27 acres of the Little Pee Dee River Heritage Preserve, a 9,000-acre tract that is home to trees, lakes, animals and part of the Little Pee Dee River. And, in order for I-73 planners can get federal permits that would preclude construction of the proposed interstate, the S.C. Department of Natural Resources Board of Trustees must agree to a compensation deal that will allow for the protection of the habitat along the Little Pee Dee River.

Barry Beasley, director of the Heritage Trust Program, said the compensation package that was approved by the Heritage Trust Advisory Board today at a meeting in Columbia will be sent to the DNR Board of Trustees for review.

The next meeting of the DNR Board will take place later this month.

The Heritage Trust Program, which is a part of the DNR, it protects significant natural and cultural lands in the state.

Beasley said he could not disclose the details of the compensation package because it is a contractual matter. The state's Freedom of Information Act allows for contractual-related information to be withheld while it is in the negotiation stage.

The DNR Board voted down a \$450,000 compensation offer from the SCDOT in May for the impact of the I-73 crossing at the Little Pee Dee.

The interstate, if it is built, ultimately will run from Myrtle Beach to Sault Ste. Marie, Mich. It will cross six states — Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia and the Carolinas — and traverse 60 miles in four Pee Dee counties.

The recommended preferred alternative for the northern portion of I-73 in South Carolina was announced July 19.

It will begin south of Hamlet in Richmond County, N.C., and travel southeast toward the Carolinas' state line, parallel with S.C. 38 into Dillon County, where it will connect with the southern portion west of Latta at Interstate 95.

Mitchell Metts, the I-73 project manager for the S.C. Department of Transportation, said during the announcement that the route chosen would affect the least amount of wetlands. The route selected also had fewer natural areas and fewer tracts with cultural interests that would be affected by the proposed interstate.

Metts also said he expects field studies for the northern route to begin in the fall.

The preferred alternative route for the southern part of the project was announced in May. The route chosen by officials runs from I-95, just west of Latta in Dillon County, through

Marion County to S.C. 22 in Horry County. Part of that project will cross through the Little Pee Dee Heritage Preserve.

It's estimated the interstate will take 10 years to build, if the money to construct it is obtained.

As a part of the last Federal Transportation Act, passed in 2005, \$81 million was earmarked for the funding of I-73 within South Carolina. The money is being spent on environmental studies and right-of-way purchases. The state also got another \$3 million in federal funds for I-73 in 2005.

The interstate is No. 5 on the U.S. Department of Transportation's list of priority roads. The project has been put on a fast track by the SCDOT, which named it as the state's No. 1 transportation priority.

The Environmental Impact Study for I-73, which typically takes about five years, is expected to be completed in three years.

For information on the proposed route for I-73 in the Palmetto State, visit www.I73inSC.com.