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Board to plan for I-73 crossing at nature preserve

By Tonya Root - The Sun News

Officials with the state's Heritage Trust Advisory Board plan to meet Thursday to discuss a crossing for Interstate 73 at the Little Pee Dee River Heritage Preserve, which if approved would allow transportation officials to apply for construction permits.

The meeting is set for 10 a.m. Thursday at the S.C. Department of Archives and History at 8301 Parklane Road in Columbia.

In May, officials with the state Department of Natural Resources Board rejected a \$450,000 offer from state Department of Transportation officials to compensate for the I-73 crossing at the Little Pee Dee River Heritage Preserve. The advisory board said in a report that the damage and affect of the crossing would have substantial effect on the area.

The crossing is planned to run alongside the S.C. 917 bridge, and it is the biggest hurdle for the I-73 permits because federal law grants special protection to conservation land. DOT officials are ready to apply for construction permits for a 30-mile section of I-73 between Interstate 95 and S.C. 22 but can't do so until the preserve crossing issue is worked out.

The Heritage Advisory Board's report said the preserve, which runs along the river between Horry and Marion counties, would be affected even if the I-73 crossing were moved farther south to avoid the preserve. According to the report, it would still cause a fragmentation of habitat and have effects on preserve management.

Among the other items on the board's agenda are legal issues regarding the Lewis Ocean Bay Heritage Preserve, which is a 9,383-acre preserve in Horry County that includes 23 Carolina Bays - the largest number of undisturbed Carolina Bays in one place in the state.

The policy-making Heritage Trust Advisory Board is a liaison between residents, the Heritage Trust Program and the S.C. Natural Resources Board.

The Heritage Trust Program was formed in 1976 to protect natural and cultural land in South Carolina. It includes 81,409 acres on 70 state heritage preserves, including two preserves in Georgetown County and four in Horry County.