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CAN THEY COMPROMISE?

Zane Wilson The Sun News

COLUMBIA An Interstate 73 summit with North Carolina on Friday in Myrtle Beach is crucial to resolving when and if North Carolina will build its three-mile remaining piece of the highway, state leaders say.

But North Carolina also wants to talk about other road projects that South Carolina is not interested in, such as extending Interstate 20 from Florence to Wilmington, N.C., and linking Interstate 74 from its Brunswick County, N.C., end to the Carolina Bays Parkway in Horry County.

"This is an I-73 summit," said Betty Mabry, director of the S.C. Department of Transportation. Congress has not designated an extension of I-20 or an I-74 spur into South Carolina, she said.

Lyndo Tippet, North Carolina's secretary of transportation and Mabry's counterpart, said he agrees I-73 is important to both states.

"Equally important to North Carolina are I-74 and the extension of I-20 to North Carolina," he said in a written statement to The Sun News.

He and his board look forward to discussing I-73 as well as the others Friday "so that we can accomplish our goal to build all three corridors," the statement said.

I-73, planned to run from Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., to Myrtle Beach, would be the first Horry County interstate highway link. The Myrtle Beach area is the largest tourism destination in the country without an interstate highway connection.

The two Carolinas have continued to discuss, but not resolve, the road connection since I-73 was designated by Congress in 1991.

S.C. leaders say North Carolina has resisted finishing the link because it does not want to encourage its residents to travel to South Carolina's beaches.

That also is why North Carolina insisted on building I-74, some say.

North Carolina has built parts of I-73 and I-74, which would split off I-73 near Rockingham, N.C., and turn east to the coast. South Carolina has just gotten the required preliminary studies under way for its I-73 route.

For the time being, South Carolina has set aside the studies of the western half of the roughly 80-mile road until an accord is reached with North Carolina.

Mabry said the two states need to do a joint environmental study on the section where the two roads would come together, to meet federal requirements.

“There has got to be a joint environmental document tying the road to the state line,” she said, because if the two states do their studies separately, the pieces might not connect.

South Carolina also wants assurances about the connecting link, “to make sure it's going to be built,” Mabry said.

Tippett's office did not comment on that question, but North Carolina does have the section of road designated as a study area.

State Rep. Alan Clemmons, R-Myrtle Beach, is president of the S.C. I-73 Association and said the discussion should focus on the I-73 connection with North Carolina.

“We want to know when they intend to build it, if they intend to build it and what other projects are on their wish list,” he said.

Other projects are welcome to the discussion, Clemmons said, but “I-20 causes me a great deal of heartburn ...

“If I-20 were to be extended, I'd much rather see it extended into the Horry County area,” rather than to Wilmington, he said.

In addition to an I-20 extension not being designated by Congress, it would be costly for South Carolina and would be much further in the future than construction of I-73, Clemmons said.

An extension of I-74 southward into northern Horry County is a more likely possibility for agreement, Clemmons said.

The Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce is sponsoring the summit, along with the I-73 association and North Eastern Strategic Alliance.

The discussions will be Friday at Embassy Suites at Kingston Plantation, but there will be a reception Thursday night so the participants can get to know one another.

“We're going to come with open ears and open minds,” said chamber President Brad Dean. “We see there's going to have to be some trade-offs.”

The finished I-73 will benefit both states, and that should help sway the discussion with North Carolina, Dean said.

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