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CAROLINAS REACH INTERSTATE DEAL

Zane Wilson The Sun News

The Carolinas struck a deal Friday on the connection points of Interstates 73 and 74, meaning the staffs of the states' transportation agencies will start plans for the projects immediately.

"Today has been a tremendous success," said Betty Mabry, director of the S.C. Department of Transportation. "This is a wonderful day because this means both of us can go forward."

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 agreement was announced in Myrtle Beach at a Carolinas summit aimed at reaching an accord on the connection that has eluded planners since 1991, when Congress designated I-73.

The agreement shifts the approximate route of I-73 slightly eastward from its original entry point into South Carolina near U.S. 1 in Wallace. Now it will enter South Carolina in the area of S.C. 38.

North Carolina will build a 3.7-mile link to the state line from the existing I-74 south of Rockingham, N.C.

In return, South Carolina will build about a 5-mile link from S.C. 31, the Carolina Bays Parkway, to the N.C. line to connect with the planned route of I-74.

The S.C. portion of I-73 is expected to cost \$2 billion. So far, the only funding approved is \$3 million for the environmental studies. DOT officials say that if they get the funds, the road can be finished in 2014.

The pact must be formalized by the transportation boards of both states, but leaders of those boards were at the summit and said they expect quick approval.

Most of the accord was worked out at an informal gathering Thursday night after a reception, when the top leadership of the two states' highway agencies began to talk, group members said.

Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce President Brad Dean was in the group as members began talking.

One of the North Carolinians said N.C. residents want an extension of Interstate 20 northeast toward Wilmington, N.C.

Dean said the South Carolinians said that project is not workable at this time, and the discussion moved quickly to how to connect I-73.

The North Carolinians said they wanted Carolina Bays Parkway extended north to connect with I-74, and the S.C. leaders said that was possible.

The deal was clinched during breakfast Friday morning by Mabry and S.C. DOT Commission Chairman Tee Hooper, joined by N.C. Secretary of Transportation Lyndo Tippet and N.C. Transportation Board Chairman Doug Galyon.

Tippet said the project benefits both states and the Carolinas were able to settle the issue ``simply because there's been a heightened interest in it."

Officials from both states say the road will not only help bring more tourists, it also will fuel economic growth.

Galyon said he is pleased with the new connection point at S.C. 38 because ``there are so many environmental problems" with the U.S. 1 route.

Mabry said the S.C. 38 area offers a straighter path and fewer hills. The I-74 leg it will connect with was not contemplated when the original U.S. 1 route was designated.

The agreement also will give Horry County two interstate highway connections.

The required environmental studies for I-73 are under way, but work on the section west of I-95 was on hold until there was an agreement on the connection point.

Mabry said she thinks the \$3 million for I-73 route studies the agency has on hand will be enough to complete the additional portions, including the I-74 link.

Contact ZANE WILSON at 520-0397 or zwilson@thesunnews.com.

Illustration:Photos by Tom Murray/The Sun News and one map.

