

Chamber will support I-73 change if state officials do

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By MICKEY POWELL - Bulletin Staff Writer
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The Martinsville-Henry County Chamber of Commerce will support a route change for the planned Interstate 73 if state officials support it.

“We are waiting to see what the officials say about the proposed change to the route,” board Chairman John Parkinson wrote in a prepared statement. “If it is feasible and our local elected officials believe that a change in the route will be more beneficial to our area, we will be supportive.”

The chamber’s board on Thursday approved the statement during a closed session. Chamber President Amanda Witt said there was no opposition.

“We’re not really advocating for either” route, she said. Rather, “we’re advocating to get the research done” to see if an alternate route would better serve local businesses.

“The chamber’s position remains unchanged: I-73 should be constructed in Martinsville/Henry County as quickly as possible ... in a manner that provides the greatest economic impact for our community,” the statement reads.

Economic developers and chamber officials say the interstate will help lure business and industry to the community.

In November, the Henry County Board of Supervisors approved a resolution asking the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) and the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) to consider an alternate route.

I-73’s planned route would pass through Henry County east of Martinsville. County supervisors and some local business leaders are pushing for another route taking the road closer to the Patriot Centre and Martinsville industrial parks and Martinsville Speedway, as well as including a connector road for Patriot Centre.

If the CTB and VDOT re-evaluate the route, “we will actively lobby for the completion of this review as quickly as possible,” the chamber’s statement says.

“Everyone wants I-73. That’s the one constant” among local public opinion, Witt said. But “everyone has to get on the same page” as far as where the highway eventually is going to be built.

A list of local businesses in support of changing I-73's route presented to the supervisors represented 17 percent of the chamber's membership. At that rate, the chamber felt it needed to issue a statement, Witt added.

Eventually, I-73 is to run from Myrtle Beach, S.C., to Detroit, Mich. Its Virginia stretch would include an interstate from the North Carolina line to near Roanoke.

That stretch is projected to cost about \$4 billion, but only \$12.6 million has been allocated and more money is needed to start construction, according to VDOT Salem District Administrator Richard Caywood.

Based on VDOT's experience with route changes, Caywood has estimated that changing I-73's route would delay the project two to three years.