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CONGRESS APPROVES \$81 MILLION FOR I-73 Zane Wilson The Sun News

Persistent and united regional lobbying for Interstate 73 helped put \$81 million for the road in the new six-year federal highway bill that passed Friday, members of the congressional delegation said.

The House passed the \$286.4 billion measure 412-8, and the Senate followed with a 91-4 vote in favor.

Sen. Jim DeMint, an S.C. Republican who voted against the bill in May because he said the \$295 billion measure was too expensive, was appointed to the conference committee to work out an agreement for a lower total amount and was able to add \$50 million for I-73.

The lobbying helped persuade leaders in the Senate to go along with his efforts, he said.

The Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce trips to Washington made an impression, DeMint said. The visits included business and political leaders from the four-county region that I-73 will cross in its S.C. route.

"That's a pretty unprecedented thing for a community to do," he said.

Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce President Brad Dean said he was glad to hear that the organization's efforts had an effect. The chamber intends to keep doing it while continuing to build support within the state, he said.

The lobbying included receptions for visiting congressional leaders who sit on committees that dispense road funds.

DeMint said Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., never forgot the enthusiastic crowd that came to greet him when he visited Myrtle Beach almost a year ago to see the need for I-73 firsthand. During that visit, Inhofe, chairman of the Senate committee that controls road funding, promised to make I-73 a highway of national significance so it would be in line for extra money.

Inhofe helped keep the designation in the highway bill when it somehow got removed during the final discussions, DeMint said.

U.S. Rep. Henry Brown, R-Hanahan, said bringing congressional leaders such as Inhofe to visit South Carolina, and having them met by bus loads of I-73 supporters, definitely helped.

Brown persuaded House leaders with power over road money to visit, including Rep. Tom Petri, R-Wisc., chairman of the House Subcommittee on Highways, Transit and Pipelines, to come to Charleston. He wasn't able to get to Myrtle Beach, so a bus load went to Charleston to see him about I-73. All of that helped, as did the unity of the state's eight-member congressional delegation, Brown said Friday.

He would not comment on a story that some supporters heard him threatening to vote against the Central America Free Trade Agreement on Wednesday after learning that I-73 had been removed from the list of highways of national and regional significance.

"We were able to get it added" before the bill went to the floor Thursday night, Brown said, but he did not want to talk about how it was done.

What counts is the final product, Brown said, "and it tastes pretty good with grits."

The bill must be signed by the president to become law. Its supporters said Bush agreed to sign it.

The measure provides \$2.9 billion to South Carolina for road projects, almost 28 percent more than the 1997 highway bill the nation is operating under.

Included in that amount is \$4 million for a connector between U.S. 701 and the Surfside Beach area, and \$2.4 million for Carolina Bays Parkway.

"It was a great week," Brown said. "I'm rejoicing."

Nationwide, the effect of the bill is \$295 billion in spending authority through 2009, a 38 percent increase over the previous highway fund law, according to a news release from the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.

Aside from special projects, highways get \$189.4 billion in the bill and mass transit gets \$45.3 billion.

A separate \$22-billion allocation is for special projects. The \$81 million for I-73 comes from that fund.

Some states, including South Carolina, will get more of their gas tax money back.

South Carolina currently has a 90 percent return rate, and that will rise to 92 percent by 2008.

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