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CONGRESSMEN HEAR COUNTY PLANS

Travis Tritten The Sun News

A rare visit by two congressmen Wednesday could increase the Grand Strand's chances at federal money for Interstate 73 and a new terminal at Myrtle Beach International Airport.

At least that's the hope of local officials who met with Rep. John Mica, R-Fla., and Rep. Henry Brown, R-S.C., during a luncheon and county airport tour.

There was no promise of funding for the interstate or the terminal from the congressmen, who both sit on a committee that oversees funding for such projects.

The federal government gave \$81 million last year to the I-73 project and guaranteed \$43 million in January for the county's proposed \$228 million airport terminal.

"Competition is tough because there is so much congestion and need for expansions at facilities like your airport," said Mica, a member of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure.

There also are many areas clamoring for money to upgrade clogged highways, he said.

But those who met with the congressmen said the face-time may help forge valuable connections with House subcommittees that handle airport and highway funding.

"We go today from a place on the map, one of the thousands [Mica's] heard of, to one he's seen," said Brad Dean, president and CEO of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce, which hosted the luncheon.

Mica is chairman of the House Aviation subcommittee, which oversees the nation's main airports agency, the Federal Aviation Administration, and the safety and infrastructure of all airports in the U.S.

He sits on the subcommittee on Highways, Transit and Pipelines, which has jurisdiction over the construction of the nation's roads.

Mica came to Myrtle Beach at the request of Brown, a fellow member of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee who recently helped shepherd \$43 million for the county airport terminal project and \$81 million for I-73.

Brown, a regular visitor to the area, said he will continue pressing for more airport terminal funding in addition to the \$43 million guaranteed by the FAA.

But more local work, such as completed route plans, will be required before more federal money goes to I-73.

Meanwhile, Horry County is also searching in other places to fund its estimated \$228 million terminal project.

There's still the possibility of grants from the federal Transportation Security Administration and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, County Council Chairwoman Liz Gilland said. The county's two congressional lobbyists also continue to trawl Washington, D.C., for federal money.

"We are following every path we can," Gilland said.

Horry County estimates there is \$214 million in funding that is very likely to be available for the terminal, which includes county bonding and leasing or selling airport property. Contact TRAVIS TRITTEN at 626-0303 or ttritten@thesunnews.com.

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