

Construction start for I-73 won't be 2011

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By MICKEY POWELL - Special to the News-Post
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The beginning phases of the construction of part of Interstate 73 probably will not begin in 2011, even though that date is in a draft Six-Year Improvement Program, state transportation officials said Monday.

"We don't know" when the project will start, said Heidi Coy, public affairs manager for the Virginia Department of Transportation's (VDOT) district office in Salem. "Everything is on hold" until a lawsuit is resolved.

Virginians for Appropriate Roads, an activist group, filed suit in federal court in Richmond in October, claiming "significant, irreversible and adverse effects on natural, scenic and ecological resources" will occur if I-73 is built.

Neither Coy nor another VDOT spokesman, Jason Bond, knew when that suit might be resolved. They also could not speculate as to when the construction process for I-73 might begin.

The date of 2011 included in the program "was really just a placeholder" on the project list that was necessary to receive some federal funds, Coy said.

"It was sort of a best case scenario date," Bond said, adding "there really wasn't anything to base it on."

If 2011 were a firm date, VDOT staff could begin the thought processes and start looking now at "what can we do with the money we have," he said.

But even that is on hold due to the lawsuit, Coy and Bond indicated.

They said about \$13.3 million in federal and state funds have been reserved for I-73 so far, but the interstate's entire stretch through southwest Virginia -- from Roanoke to the North Carolina line -- is estimated at \$4 billion. That includes preliminary work as well as construction.

Coy said the final draft of the Six-Year Improvement Program will include a notation that I-73 is on hold, if another start date cannot be determined.

The proposed interstate would cut through Franklin County east of Rocky Mount.