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DNR panel agrees to payment in I-73 deal  
DOT pays for preserve land for crossing

By Zane Wilson - The Sun News

COLUMBIA --With almost no discussion, the state Department of Natural Resources board agreed Friday to accept a payment of \$750,000 for 30 acres of a preserve that will be damaged by an Interstate 73 crossing.

"I'm comfortable with that," DNR board Chairman Mike McShane said. No one else commented and no one voted against the deal.

The money will come from Department of Transportation funds set aside for I-73 right of way.

The deal will not be final, however, until it is approved by the state Budget and Control Board. Its next meeting is Nov. 6.

Little Pee Dee River Heritage Trust Preserve, on the border between Horry and Marion counties, will be crossed just south of the existing S.C. 917 bridge.

Because the preserve gets special protection under federal highway law, the approval for the crossing is crucial for the I-73 construction permit and is the last remaining piece needed for federal approval of the route.

The agreement, brokered by Gov. Mark Sanford's staff after the DNR rejected a \$450,000 offer, provides about \$25,000 for each of the 30 acres, which will be used to buy more land to preserve.

The Heritage Trust Advisory Board voted unanimously earlier this month to approve the exchange.

"We would obviously use those funds for a replacement of the bottomland hardwoods habitat that would be lost," Heritage Trust program manager Barry Beasley told the board.

Some supporters of what is planned as Myrtle Beach's first interstate highway connection questioned why one state agency would have to pay another for land the taxpayers already own. The Heritage Trust Preserve law requires that if any of the property is taken for other public use, enough compensation must be paid to provide for an equal replacement of the land.

Some legislators also held up some of DNR's bills at the end of the session as punishment for the agency holding up the I-73 plan.

Marion County's lawmakers withheld approval of a new heritage trust acquisition in their area until the Little Pee Dee River crossing was agreed to.

McShane said DNR was not trying to hold up I-73 plans and that the result of the deal is better for the state.

"DNR was the solution to helping save the state \$100 million," McShane said. That was the possible cost of the longer routes to the north or south of the preserve.

In addition, the state will be able to preserve more land with the payment.

The Coastal Conservation League and Southern Environmental Law Center have cautioned that approving the crossing sets a dangerous precedent, and the DNR should not do it.

"That's their role," McShane said.

"We never want to see a heritage trust property impacted," because the land was considered important enough to preserve. But sometimes intrusion is unavoidable, he said. I-73 is going to be built somewhere nearby, and DNR's studies showed the preserve would be affected no matter where the road crosses the river, but the proposed site is the least damaging.

Contact ZANE WILSON at 357-9188 or [zwilson@thesunnews.com](mailto:zwilson@thesunnews.com).