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DOT plans I-73 payback for preserve
Agencies expect agreement in May

By Zane Wilson - The Sun News

GEORGETOWN --A plan to compensate for the 27 acres that Interstate 73 will take when it crosses the Little Pee Dee River Heritage Preserve will be presented May 3, a state Department of Transportation planner said Friday.

Mitchell Metts, I-73 project manager for the DOT, told the state Department of Natural Resources board that the road planners and DNR staff have been working on the project together.

The DNR board held its monthly meeting at the Yawkey Center on South Island as part of its plan to rotate meetings around the state.

The two state agencies have been working for at least six months on an agreement that should clinch the last piece needed for the DOT to get a federal permit to build the section of the road between Interstate 95 and S.C. 22.

But it is not necessary to disturb the preserve, said David Farren, an attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center in Chapel Hill, N.C. The highway should use the corridors of existing roads such as U.S. 501 and S.C. 9 and those would have less impact on the environment, he said.

"There are still some very important unanswered questions about the routing," Farren said.

Federal law forbids disturbing a nature preserve unless there is no alternative, but in this case there are alternatives, he said. The legal requirements will make what the DOT wants to do "very tricky," he said.

The Heritage Trust Advisory Board has discussed the preserve crossing issue twice without coming to a conclusion, and some legislators have accused the DNR of trying to stop the highway, said board Chairman Mike McShane.

The accusations have been "very disheartening," McShane said.

He said there are many people who want the DNR to oppose I-73, but the agency will not do that. It simply wants to take what it believes is needed time for a "precedent-setting" decision that would allow a new highway to disturb a preserve.

"We certainly want to make this a priority for the Heritage Trust board," McShane said.

Metts said he hopes the Heritage Trust board will act quickly on the compensation plan so the DNR board can approve it later in May.

The Department of Transportation had hoped to get its final documents for the application to the Federal Highway Administration this spring, but that will now wait until fall, Metts said.

DNR Director John Frampton said he is personally overseeing discussions on what the compensation should be, as he promised Rep. Alan Clemmons, R-Myrtle Beach.

Clemmons was among those who said the DNR was trying to hold up the process. He said the agency was offered a piece of land surrounded by the preserve and refused it, but both the DNR and the DOT denied at Friday's meeting that any such offer had been made or discussed.

Metts told the board that most of the state and federal agencies involved in the road planning, including the Environmental Protection Agency, approved of the Little Pee Dee crossing because it ruins less land than avoiding the preserve.

Road planners began by saying they would avoid the preserves but found doing so was more damaging to the environment.

"That route through the heritage preserve impacts 40 less acres of wetlands," Metts said.

The interstate bridge is to be built just south of the existing S.C. 917 crossing. Additionally, that bridge needs to be replaced and the construction would disturb about as much land as building the interstate bridge would, Metts said.

"It's already disturbed there where [S.C.] 917 is crossing," so the agency believes it is better to build the interstate bridge there than in a new location that would cause a new disruption to the ecosystem.

The DOT has also said that it is more expensive and causes more damage to existing homes and commercial property to use U.S. 501 or S.C. 9.