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Page: A1

DOT STICKS WITH I-73 ROUTES Zane Wilson The Sun News

COLUMBIA The state Department of Transportation stood by its decision not to open a southern Interstate 73 route study, and three Horry County Council members who attended a wide-ranging discussion with highway officials on the road routes Friday said they will keep pressing.

At the same time, the DOT staff revealed some possible adjustments in the routes under study that would take one path away from the heart of Cool Spring and the other farther from Aynor.

The two communities have been the source of the most intense complaints about the road routes. Councilman John Boyd, R-Aynor, said "the modification of the route makes it better" but he is not ready to give up on a southern path closer to U.S. 378.

The adjusted proposals take a path north of Cool Spring off S.C. 319 to connect with S.C. 22, and the other major corridor takes a dip farther south of Aynor.

"I think today began a very good dialogue," Boyd said.

DOT I-73 project manager Mitchell Metts said the review of possible southern routes for I-73 that Boyd and others requested have been thoroughly considered.

"We're very solid in our decision still," he said.

Residents of the Aynor and Cool Spring areas would like to see the proposed path of the road closer to U.S. 378. They say there are fewer residents and generations-old family farms to disturb in that section.

Residents in the Surfside Beach-Garden City Beach area would like to see a more southern route that would come to the coast, accomplishing both the desired interstate highway access and a long-sought southern connector at the same time.

Their position is supported by Boyd, council Chairwoman Liz Gilland and others who fear they will get only one chance at major federal highway money.

"We think we have one shot to build a federal highway," so the two major needs should be met at the same time, Councilman Howard Barnard said. The southern route is so important it is worth a delay of six months to a year for I-73, Barnard said.

DOT Director Betty Mabry said having one federal highway will not shut the door on others.

“This is not just this one shot for Horry County,” she said. “It’s not this or nothing.”

The current proposed study routes are the ones that were found to be the least damaging environmentally, Mabry said.

The DOT has to pick the least environmentally damaging route to get a federal permit, said Bob Lee, federal highway administration manager for South Carolina.

“My concern has been the social fabric of my district,” Boyd said. “We would like to see I-73 come into an area where our future is going to be.”

He said an expected regional airport and other economic development would be more likely to locate in southern Marion County because the land is available, and he said I-73 should be close to it.

That is part of the argument of state Rep. Nelson Hardwick, R-Surfside Beach, who said the state is replacing the bridges over the Pee Dee River on U.S. 378, and could use the old bridge roadbed for I-73, then connect it to S.C. 22, also known as Veterans Highway.

Rep. Liston Barfield, R-Aynor, said the route should be farther south so it will cross Interstate 95 closer to Interstate 20. That way it will draw people who travel I-20, he said.

Metts and Skip Johnson of LPA Group produced maps showing a study they made of several routes based on suggestions from Boyd, Hardwick, Barnard and others.

All involve higher costs and more wetland disturbances, especially the corridor that would combine I-73 and the Southern Connector. That plan would cost \$348 million more, using rough estimates, and the Hardwick plan would cost \$272 million more, Metts said.

Barnard said combining the Southern Connector route with the I-73 plans now makes more sense for the long term. He also said it makes no sense to avoid damaging an additional 210 acres of wetland when peoples' lives are at stake in disaster evacuations.

“There are other ways, though, that we can accomplish saving those lives,” Mabry said.

The Southern Connector is a good project but it should move separately from I-73, Metts said. Trying to make the two plans one project is too much increase in cost and environmental damage as well as delay, he said.

Despite not hearing what he hoped to hear, Barnard said it was “a tremendous day” because the DOT responded to the council's request to be heard. He also said he was impressed with the new lines and the study the staff did on the southern routes.

Gilland told Mabry ``we want this highway" and will unite behind the final proposed route.

``I-73 is great," Gilland said, ``but the critical need is for the Southern Connector."

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