

Debate over the future of SC DOT seat

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Big changes are coming at the South Carolina Department of Transportation. And now, right in the middle of it, Horry and Georgetown Counties are clashing over a seat on the DOT Commission. Some local officials are worried that the changes could threaten local highway projects.

Could long-awaited road projects take a detour this year? That has Horry County transportation officials worried. State DOT Director Betty Mabry, considered a good friend to the Grand Strand, retired under fire. Also, the Transportation Commission could be re-structured by the Legislature, and our congressional district's seat on the Transportation Commission is vacant right now. All that has Horry County officials worried that local projects, especially I-73, could get shoved to the back of the pack.

"If we lose support on the Highway Commission and the staff, because of the lack of a commissioner, the staff starts backing off on their support, we could lose the whole project," said Mike Wooten, Former RIDE Chairman.

To make matters worse, local lawmakers from Horry and Georgetown Counties are sparring over who should represent the Grand Strand on the DOT Commission.

Horry County transportation leaders say, in the past, this area has lost out to Charleston when it comes to transportation funding. And they're afraid unless Horry and Georgetown Counties start working together soon, that could happen again.

"Given the fact that we don't even know how the commission will be structured, the best thing that can happen in the short term, is we get a commissioner who will represent Horry and Georgetown Counties together," said Brad Dean, Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce.

Dean and Wooten say projects paid for by the new penny sales tax should be safe, but other projects could lose ground in a DOT shake-up. Horry and Georgetown County lawmakers were supposed to meet Thursday to hash out an agreement, but bad weather in Columbia postponed the meeting. They'll try again next week.