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DILLON PRESSURED TO ACCEPT I-73 PROJECT

The Associated Press

BENNETTSVILLE

Pee Dee leaders want Dillon County officials to accept the proposed route for Interstate 73, saying that a request for a change could delay or scuttle getting federal money for the road.

The Dillon County Economic Development Board has asked state transportation officials to change the preferred route so it comes closer to the city of Dillon. The route chosen by the S.C. Transportation Department has I-73 running west of Latta. Dillon officials say that route won't bring economic development to the area.

If the request by Dillon officials is granted, the delays could risk needed federal funding for the 90-mile project in South Carolina, said U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C.

Graham spoke Friday to the North Eastern Strategic Alliance's executive committee. The group is an alliance of political and business leaders from nine Pee Dee counties. Getting money for I-73 has been one of its biggest projects in the past five years.

"There's always someone who's going to be mad and someone who's going to be happy with a road project," Graham said. "But we can't let this get caught up in the politics of routing because it hurts our chances for funding."

The interstate, which will eventually link the state with Michigan, will run 90 miles across South Carolina, giving the 14 million tourists who visit the Myrtle Beach area each year their first direct interstate link to the Grand Strand.

It also will go through some of the poorest areas of the state, and leaders hope businesses and other investment will follow.

I-73 is expected to be a toll road, but the fees would only pay for a small part of the
\$2.1 billion project.

Most of the money is expected to come from the federal government.

Dillon County officials said earlier this week the county would be better off without I-73 because the proposed route doesn't have an interchange where the interstate would cross U.S. 301 - the major north-south roadway through the county.

The alliance responded by unanimously approving a resolution asking transportation officials to add the interchange to their plans.

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