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DUELING INTERSTATES

Legislative spats of the sort that embroiled local Reps. Alan Clemmons and Tracy Edge last week seem silly to outside observers. Life in the rarefied air under the S.C. Capitol dome often can get ridiculously intense.

But this spat, over how much state money to allocate to interstates 73 and 74 respectively, is anything but ridiculous. Edge, a member of the budget-writing House Ways and Means Committee, regards I-74 to be equally critical to I-73 for local economic development and hurricane safety. It will run through his district along the route now occupied by S.C. 31 - once the five-mile link between that road's current terminus and the N.C. line is built.

But other Horry County delegation members are on board with Clemmons in regarding I-74 as a sideshow and I-73 as the main event. That road would run roughly 90 miles from the N.C. line in Marlboro County to Myrtle Beach - the final 20 miles or so along S.C. 22. Their fear that a dual-road approach giving I-74 equal weight with I-73 would inevitably detract from state support of I-73.

Thus did Clemmons, who is not on Ways and Means, induce a Democratic committee member to strip \$500,000 allocated for routing, planning and construction of I-74 and designate it instead for infrastructure work along the I-73 route through the Pee Dee. By week's end, Edge appeared to have beaten this insurrection back.

From the idealist's perspective, Edge is right. Both interstates would end at the Grand Strand and both would be instrumental in bring new business and wealth into our communities. And you certainly can't fault the man for representing his constituents' best interest. I-74 will be more valuable to North Strand residents than I-73.

From the realist's perspective, however, Clemmons is right. If the Strand appears unified behind I-73, it becomes harder for other S.C. legislators to bushwhack the project and spend its money elsewhere. Certainly, it makes sense to work with Pee Dee legislators to move power and sewer lines in advance of highway construction. And unlike I-74, I-73 is South Carolina's route to the beach. I-74 is primarily an N.C. road.

In the end, though, power politics will decide which road gets what state money and when. Considering that both will come to our communities, this sounds like a win-win situation to us.

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