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Feasibility, cost, value of I-73 plan debated

By JOHN O'CONNOR - joconnor@thestate.com

Some of those behind the push to build Interstate 73 in South Carolina:

Brad Dean — Executive director of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce, Dean has been an outspoken proponent. Dean resurrected a multi-state group that supported the road and helped coordinate lobbying efforts among the states.

Joe Young — The Department of Transportation commissioner is an outspoken supporter. His influence on the six other commission members could determine how the road is financed, if it is a toll road and whether the road is built using a private-sector partner.

State Sen. Yancey McGill — The head of the North Eastern Strategic Alliance is a powerful political force in favor of the road. The regional economic development group has made I-73 its top priority and lobbied the General Assembly and Transportation Department to do the same.

South Carolina's congressional delegation — U.S. Rep. John Spratt helps write the federal budget, while U.S. Rep. Jim Clyburn is part of the Democratic House leadership. South Carolina's delegation will have a big say in how much federal money is available for the \$2.3 billion road.

The courts — Environmental groups have raised questions about building the highway through protected land; others may challenge the route or the use of eminent domain to buy right-of-way. It is possible I-73's fate could be determined in a courtroom. The proposed interstate to Myrtle Beach is now just a purple line on a map, but, eventually, it could eat up 75 acres of Jon Rogers' farm.

Interstate 73 has been pitched as a Myrtle Beach-to-Michigan route that will bring more tourists — and tax revenue — to South Carolina, while adding jobs to Marlboro, Dillon, Marion and Horry counties. The road could mean a sea change to the culture and economy of the Pee Dee, something Rogers opposes.

"I feel like all it is for the big shots at the beach," Rogers said. "It's going to put me out of business."

Rogers is not alone in questioning the \$2.3 billion I-73, named the state's top new highway project in March.

- Critics note other states have no plans to complete their portions of the proposed road.

- They question why it isn't being built more cheaply and with less impact on the environment.
- They also doubt the economic benefits — new businesses and millions of additional tourists — that supporters tout.

In the process, 115 families could lose their homes and hundreds more could lose property, including Rogers.

“I don't see how it's necessary,” said Rogers, whose family has owned the land for six generations. “It's just about greed.”

WINDING ROAD AHEAD

As federal approval for the road nears and the state makes plans to begin buying land, supporters and critics alike expect the debate about the road and its cost to intensify.

As proposed, I-73 would run about 1,200 miles, connecting the Grand Strand to Greensboro, N.C.; Roanoke, Va.; Columbus, Ohio; and, eventually, Sault Sainte Marie on the Canadian border in Michigan's upper peninsula.

First discussed in the early 1980s, I-73 initially would have connected Charleston to Detroit. But environmental concerns and the desire for an interstate to Myrtle Beach led officials to change its route.

The 1991 federal highway funding bill designated I-73 as a priority, and federal money has been budgeted for the project in drips and drabs since. In June, U.S. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters came to Myrtle Beach and said I-73 was her federal department's fifth-highest priority.

South Carolina has about \$90 million in state and federal money on hand for the road.

The project has been broken into two pieces in South Carolina. The southern portion connects S.C. 22 near Conway to Interstate 95. The northern portion would connect I-95 to Hamlet, N.C.

The road runs north, passing east of Marion, west of Latta and east of Bennettsville. Work on the southern portion is about a year ahead of the northern portion.

Mitchell Metts, South Carolina Department of Transportation's I-73 project manager, expects federal approval of an environmental impact study in November. Once approved, Metts said, the state could begin buying land for the southern portion.

Supporters say paying for the road could be the state's biggest challenge. Officials in Michigan, Ohio and Virginia said they can not build the road without more money from the federal government.

However, the U.S. Department of Transportation opened the way for another financing option earlier this year, allowing I-73 to be built as a toll road. Money collected from motorists as they travel the road could pay for construction or maintenance, or be turned over to a private company in exchange for designing and building the road in whole or part.

TOURISM, JOBS, SAFETY

The case for I-73 hangs on three beliefs. Advocates say the interstate will:

- Provide a needed coastal hurricane evacuation route.
- Bring more tourists to Myrtle Beach, which is not on an interstate.
- Bring jobs to the Pee Dee.

Few dispute an interstate connecting I-95 and Myrtle Beach is needed. The question is how best to build the road and whether to complete the route past I-95 to the North Carolina line.

In March, state lawmakers and members of the North Eastern Strategic Alliance, an economic development group, met with state Transportation Department commissioners in Florence state Sen. Hugh Leatherman's office, urging the agency to support I-73. At a Transportation commission meeting later that day, the panel voted to make I-73 the state's top new road priority and not wait for agency staff to finish its criteria-based ranking of road projects.

State Rep. Jim Battle, D-Marion, calls I-73 a "life line" for his county and others in the Pee Dee.

"We know that we're losing tourist dollars right now ... as soon as these roads are built, the factories and companies will come in," Battle said.

Brad Dean, executive director of the Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce, estimates up to 3 million additional tourists a year would come to the Grand Strand because of the shorter drive. Tourism is the state's top industry, and the state Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism estimates the beach community generates \$7 billion in retail sales each year, while collecting \$13 million in accommodations and \$9 million in admissions taxes.

But for some on the proposed route, the road may not make economic sense.

Many of Myrtle Beach's visitors now exit Interstate 95 in Dillon County. However, Dillon officials worry I-73 could act as a Dillon by-pass.

County leaders support an interstate to the beach. But they want it routed between Latta and Dillon, with an interchange on to four-lane U.S. 301/501, where surrounding farmland could be turned into an industrial park.

Instead, as proposed, the road would run west of Latta with the only Dillon County interchange near the county's southern border.

"We're not seeing that we're getting that," said Charlie Vance, senior vice president of First Bank in Dillon, of I-73's job-creating potential. "We're seeing the opposite of that."

Metts, with the Transportation Department, said the route selected has the lowest impact on property owners and the environment.

But Gene Butler, director of the Dillon County Development Board, believes the road route chosen was not in the best interests of his county's residents.

"It just doesn't make a lot of sense," Butler said.

ROSY PROJECTIONS

Critics say South Carolina's top highway project is being sold with rosy projections and political strong-arming.

"It's a huge bill of goods being sold on false pretenses," said David Farren, an attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center in Chapel Hill, N.C., which opposes the current I-73 plans. "Spending \$2 billion on this project may not be the best use of highway money."

The Southern Environmental Law Center does not oppose an interstate to Myrtle Beach but does question the northern portion of the highway from I-95 to North Carolina. Most tourists to Myrtle Beach come from North Carolina, Virginia, New York and places where they likely would not drive the northern route, Farren said.

The group also has challenged using 30 acres protected in the Little Pee Dee River Heritage Trust Preserve to build the southern section, worried about the precedent for other preservation lands.

Farren said the state could upgrade S.C. 38 or S.C. 9 — both four-lane highways between I-95 and Myrtle Beach — to interstate standards rather than build a new road. Doing that, Farren said, could be done at one-tenth the cost of building a new interstate and would have less environmental impact.

But Metts said upgrading an existing highway would mean encroaching on development along the state highway. The cost of buying that land, engineering the highway and replacing the lost local route would not represent a cost savings, or inconvenience residents less, than I-73 as proposed, he said.

A LOW PRIORITY ELSEWHERE

While supporters and detractors debate I-73's S.C. route, its future is even murkier in other states.

Some states say they have no plans to build their portion of the Myrtle Beach-to-Michigan route. Others do not envision the road crossing their state as a limited-access interstate.

- Ohio and Michigan have no plans for I-73, according to their long-term budgets. Both states say their current north-south routes are sufficient.
- West Virginia does not plan to build a traditional interstate, said state Transportation Department spokeswoman Beth Watkins. Instead, it will opt for a four-lane highway built to interstate standards but with occasional traffic lights and intersections.
- Virginia has plans to build a route from Roanoke to the North Carolina line, said Virginia transportation spokeswoman Heidi Coy, but has no source of money for the \$4 billion project. In addition, the state has no plans to complete the other half of the road to the West Virginia border.
- Much of North Carolina's section of I-73 is under way, though start dates for some portions have not been decided.

Opinions are split about whether an incomplete I-73 would diminish the interstate's positive economic impact on South Carolina.

"I think that's a legitimate concern," said state Rep. Doug Jennings, D-Marlboro and a road supporter. "If it doesn't connect, then obviously it's not an interstate. We think it's going to stay on the front burner and actually be built from Myrtle Beach to Sault Sainte Marie."

Dean, with the Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce, said much of the route already exists, though not as an interstate, and connecting to North Carolina interstates would be valuable.

Metts said an incomplete interstate could diminish the ability to pay for the road with tolls, if that option is selected. The Transportation Department estimates I-73 would carry 30,000 vehicles a day, 30 percent from out-of-state.

For Pee Dee residents outside of Myrtle Beach, opinions on the road vary. At an August public meeting in Bennettsville, many residents — some angry and weeping — opposed the road.

Tom O'Neal, who lives on the proposed route near Blenheim, thinks I-73 would hurt local businesses.

"I see people getting through here in a hurry," said O'Neal, 82. "I think they've got a lot of money they need to spend on existing roads."

But Frankie Smalls, who just completed his home in the Williams Park neighborhood near Mullins in July, was more supportive.

"It's going to help the economy, no question about that," said Smalls, 45. "What are you going to do? It's progress, and South Carolina needs more progress."

Reach O'Connor at (803) 771-8358.