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FRIDAY FORUM

Federal official to look at I-73
DOT chief accepts invitation to MB for talks on project

By Zane Wilson - The Sun News

COLUMBIA --U.S. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters plans to come to Myrtle Beach Friday for the Interstate 73 Corridor Association meeting and to see road conditions here for herself.

The announcement came Tuesday from U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-Seneca, who said he invited her and that she was tentatively able to arrange her schedule to come.

"We have very pressing short- and long-term transportation needs," Graham said in a news release.

"This is an opportunity to show Secretary Peters firsthand our needs and encourage the department to be a partner in our effort to address them. I appreciate her willingness to come and hear our story."

Graham's spokesman, Kevin Bishop, said Peters' definite schedule won't be disclosed until Thursday, and he could not say how much of the meeting she would attend or what she hoped to view for herself while in the area.

But her expected visit is highly significant for the I-73 meeting, said Brad Dean, president of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce.

Dean arranged the meeting, the first in more than a decade, of supporters from all six states that I-73 would traverse. It is planned to run from the Myrtle Beach area to Sault Ste. Marie, Mich.

He said the corridor meeting itself is exciting, but Peters' planned visit "adds a whole different level of excitement."

Her presence will show the corridor members the seriousness with which the federal government views the project, Dean said.

Graham agreed.

"Tourism is one of the leading industries in our state," he said.

"I-73 is an incredibly important road for the future of the Grand Strand and really the entire state. Our local, state and federal officials understand the importance of this future interstate.

"Now, we need to impress upon the secretary of DOT our unified commitment to helping turn it into reality. I think her visit to the Grand Strand will certainly help in the effort."

State Rep. Tracy Edge, R-North Myrtle Beach, helped put \$6 million for I-73/74 into the state budget, but the Senate cut \$5 million of it.

Edge is one of the three House members working on a compromise with the Senate on the \$7.3 billion state budget and is trying to get the money restored, because the \$5 million that was cut would have been permanent annual funding.

"I'd love to be able to announce Friday that we've succeeded in retrieving the money for I-73, but it remains to be seen if our Senate colleagues will go along with it," Edge said.

The permanent funding was to be used to issue bonds to start construction.

I-73 was fifth on a list of 43 new interstate corridors designated by Congress in 1991, but none were funded. Pieces of the road have been built in North Carolina and West Virginia, while South Carolina and Virginia are coming close to being able to build parts of their portions.

Ohio and Michigan had not shown interest in the project for years, but Dean said they have a renewed interest now that they see other pieces of the puzzle coming together.

Peters is no stranger to road issues. She was Federal Highway administrator from 2001 to 2005. Previously, she worked for years in the Arizona DOT and became its director. She later worked for the nationwide consulting firm HDR in transportation projects before being hired in Washington.

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