

Feds give Virginia go-ahead for I-73

Designers for the \$4 billion interstate will be directed to anticipate conditions in 2025.

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The federal government on Friday authorized Virginia to begin designing Interstate 73, a futuristic highway link between the Roanoke Valley and the North Carolina line.

It's not clear how long the design will take, or how it will be paid for, let alone when I-73 will be built or where the money for construction will come from. State road officials have secured less than 1 percent of the project's \$4 billion price tag. Designers will be directed to anticipate conditions in 2025.

"Clearly there are still a lot of questions that need to be answered, but we have moved forward with the next step," said Virginia Department of Transportation spokesman Chuck Lionberger. The highway's conception dates to 1993.

VDOT officials say I-73 will be a road that can safely handle the through traffic between Roanoke and North Carolina, and that U.S. 220 is inadequate.

The section of I-73 that would run through downtown Roanoke is supposed to follow the alignment of Interstate 581. Designers will begin making such calls as whether I-73 will be wider than I-581, which has three lanes in each direction.

South of the Roanoke Valley in the Clearbrook neighborhood, I-73 is expected to form a new road east of U.S. 220 in most places all the way down to south of Ridgeway.

The Federal Highway Administration decision that was announced Friday informed VDOT in Richmond that, because of the completion of environmental studies, engineers should begin to design I-73.

The cost of developing the engineering blueprints for the entire highway is expected to be \$330 million, VDOT said, and only \$13.3 million in state and federal funds are currently budgeted for the highway.

Design work can't begin until VDOT talks with local officials about which segment of the highway should be built first, Lionberger said. A timetable has yet to be worked out.

"This is a victory for Southwest Virginia," said George Lester of Martinsville, chairman of JobLink, a coalition of rural community leaders. He said he sees logic in road builders starting in or near Henry County, as opposed to the Roanoke Valley, because the Henry County region is rural and more economically depressed.

The I-73 project has one thing in common with the planned widening of Interstate 81: Both would cost billions.

VDOT Salem District Administrator Richard Caywood said in a news release that I-73 "will be a very involved, very expensive project."

Ann Rogers of Virginians for Appropriate Roads said a lawsuit by the environmental group is likely.

This group previously argued successfully to have I-73's proposed route moved out of its once-proposed path through Southeast Roanoke, so that it now follows U.S. 220 through much of Roanoke County. VAR's efforts led to the route through Southeast Roanoke being declared eligible for historic status, effectively blocking that route.

The legal action being contemplated concerns objections to the current route by federal agencies that were consulted by the FHA. VAR will have Washington attorney Andrea Ferster bring those agency comments into court for a judicial ruling, said Rogers, a Roanoke County resident.

For instance, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said the route that would damage the environment the least would follow the existing U.S. 220 without rebuilding it to wider interstate-highway standards.

Rogers is among those concerned about how the road might affect the Pigg River section inhabited by the Roanoke logperch, a fish listed as an endangered species.

Although her group had not yet read the decision made available Friday, "Everything we've seen up till now points to there being a number of actionable issues," Rogers said.

On the Net: www.i73info.com/

Staff writer Ray Reed contributed to this report.