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GRAHAM: I-73 MONEY SAFE
Travis Tritten The Sun News

U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham may have voted against a recent highway funding bill, but Thursday he said enough money will be available in next year's federal budget for preliminary Interstate 73 funding.

Still, the money needed for the construction of I-73, which will link the Grand Strand with areas as far away as Michigan, is still up in the air, and Graham, R-Seneca, warned that a new push in Horry County to reconsider the highway's route could hurt federal construction funding chances.

``The more secure and certain the plan, the more likely the funding," he said. ``When you have X amount of dollars, you are not going to invest it where there is chaos."

Graham discussed the highway and various other issues during a meeting with The Sun News editorial board Thursday, including Horry County's new airport terminal project, the battle over Senate filibusters and a future hydrogen economy in South Carolina.

The I-73 project is highly important for eastern South Carolina and one of three key projects pinpointed by Graham. A regional airport and an international trade center are also crucial for economic development in the area, he said.

Congress is now working to put together a spending plan that Graham said will include the I-73 funding.

``Every dollar we need to get I-73 prepared for construction will be in this budget," he said.

Now, local leaders must put together a financing plan for the project, especially state government, which will reap great economic benefits from the increased tourism traffic to the coast, Graham said.

The state must make a significant funding contribution and tolls should be discussed as a way to raise money, he said.

Last month, Graham joined a small group of senators who voted against a \$295 billion Senate transportation bill that included money for the highway.

Graham called the bill "a low point" for Congress this year. The bill was increased by \$11 billion in just a week by adding pet projects, and the math used to justify the spending didn't add up, he said.

"It was a charade, it was a breaking of the budget, and it was a tough vote," he said.

Federal funding also will play into the future of Horry County's plan for a new terminal at Myrtle Beach International Airport.

County Council hit the pause button last week when it became public that the terminal could cost more than \$250 million and only \$120 million in funding has materialized so far. Council members say they will hold off until they determine how much federal funding will be available.

Graham said any federal help is likely to be a "hodge-podge" of technical funding and grants.

"There is no pot of money for the federal government to build terminals," he said.

The federal government can help out by taking over certain responsibilities at the airport as the facility grows, such as funding all customs functions once passenger traffic reaches a higher level, Graham said.

Graham has made a name for himself in Washington since he joined the Senate in 2003, mainly because of his willingness to reach across party lines, even working with right-wing Republican nemesis Hillary Rodham Clinton.

"I am not going to be the type of senator who always defines themselves by what they are against," he said. "If it takes working with Hillary Clinton to get there, then that is what I am willing to do."

Graham was among the bipartisan group of senators who defused the recent so-called nuclear option showdown in the Senate, a filibuster debate over the confirmation of Bush administration judicial nominees that threatened to change long-established rules in the chamber that allowed either party to stymie appointments.

"I believe that over time it will make sense not to blow up the Senate," he said. "I think we are going to have a Senate that will be able to do more for the American people in a time of war and Lindsey Graham was part of it."

If Democrats would have won the vote, the Republican agenda could have been blocked but the solution, which allowed some nominees to be confirmed, opened a new page in the chamber, Graham said.

"What we provided was a chance for the Senate to start over," he said.

Some conservatives criticized the agreement, and Tony Perkins, head of the Family Research Council, warned there will be repercussions for Republicans who went along.

Graham, however, discussed how he spent time earlier this week in Asia visiting American troops.

“None of them have to go,” he said at a Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce luncheon, his first public appearance in South Carolina since last week’s agreement.

“They all choose to go. Some of them are not going to come back,” he said. “The least I can do is be willing to make a few people mad for the good of our country.”

As the Senate gets back to work, it may consider lifting bans on exploring for oil and natural gas along the East and West coasts of the United States, including along South Carolina.

“I feel terrible about that,” Graham said. “The worst thing we can do as a nation is taking the easy way out as a way of doing business. If you start opening up offshore drilling, then you are buying time and you are not addressing the fundamental problem with fossil fuels.”

Fuels such as oil are a finite resource and most often found in the Middle East and areas that are hostile to the United States, Graham said.

The country needs to focus on diversifying its energy sources into areas such as nuclear and hydrogen power, he said.

Hydrogen fuel cells, which use one of the universe’s most common elements, have caused international buzz as a possible fuel source for the future but the technology is still in its infancy.

Graham said South Carolina is leading the way in hydrogen fuel research and a breakthrough could be a boon to the state’s economy.

“In my lifetime ... we are going to have a major hydrogen fuel economy,” he said.

The Associated Press contributed to this article.

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