

Grand Strand goes to the top for I-73 pitch

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The nation's number one transportation official, Secretary of Transportation Mary Peters, was here Friday to see why local officials are pushing so hard for the interstate.

Local leaders arranged Peters' visit so she could see in person what drivers on the Grand Strand have to put up with every day.

The goal was to convince Peters that building Interstate 73 is necessary to take pressure off US Highway 501.

It would appear she got the message. "What at one point in time was a very pleasant drive has turned into a long trial of traffic and frustration for visitors and for residents of this area," Peters said.

U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham, who arranged Peters' visit, doesn't need any more convincing about I-73. "We're going to build this road," he said.

One local official after another made the pitch, about how 501 hasn't been upgraded in 20 years, while the number of visitors to the Grand Strand has grown seven-fold, and about how I-73 would help tourism, economic development and hurricane evacuation.

Peters said all the right things during her tour, but will her visit really do any good? Tourism leaders believe it will by convincing Peters to push I-73 up on the list to get federal funding.

"She can help us truly establish this as a funding priority. Everybody agrees it's important. Now we just got to agree that they'll put their money where their mouth is, and she can help with that," said Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce President Brad Dean.

Horry County Councilman Marion Foxworth added, "We can't do it alone. We're going to have to have the help of the state and federal government to do it."

Peters says by early next year, the federal government should be ready to give South Carolina the clearance it needs to start building the interstate. She says the question now isn't if, but when I-73 gets built.