

## **Hopeful I-73 report apparently off track**

A business group said the highway had a date for construction, but VDOT disagrees.

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By Jeff Sturgeon  
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State road officials said Monday they do not have a construction date for Interstate 73 in Virginia, countering a report by a business organization Friday that work on the proposed highway is now scheduled to begin in 2011.

George Lester of Martinsville, chairman of JobLink, a group of community leaders in Virginia and North Carolina, raised expectations about the project with a news release last week. He said a draft Commonwealth Transportation Board budget for 2008-09 authorizes construction of the first leg near economically depressed Martinsville-Henry County in 2011.

Officials have chosen "the first public date ever designated for building I-73 in Virginia," said a JobLink release, urging people to support the draft budget, which is up for public review until June 1. "This finally puts I-73 within reach."

Monday, Virginia Department of Transportation officials disagreed with Lester's take on I-73, which was identified as a national transportation priority in 1991.

Not only is the \$4 billion project delayed by low levels of funding, but all planning also came to a halt last fall with the filing of a legal challenge by project opponents calling themselves Virginians for Appropriate Roads. The case is pending in U.S. District Court in Roanoke.

"At this point the I-73 project is on hold pending the outcome of the lawsuit," VDOT spokeswoman Heidi Coy said.

Lester could not be reached for comment Monday.

Janet Decker, an assistant of Lester's, said Lester's only reply was that he took the position he did because the construction date appears in a VDOT draft 2008-09 budget.

The date does appear. But the agency didn't intend for the date to be taken as a construction commitment, according to VDOT's Jason Bond.

When construction money comes into the agency's possession, which it has, the agency must record it in the budget with an estimated construction date. The figure serves as little more than a placeholder, Bond said. Future budget versions will make that clearer, Bond said.

Lester said in the JobLink release that he was elated to announce that I-73 would finally be built. Lester, whose company, The Lester Group, is active in retailing of building supplies and commercial and residential development, went to Richmond to thank state road officials for making I-73 a priority, the release said.

The planned road is expected to follow I-581 in the Roanoke Valley but form a new road south of Clearbrook running east of U.S. 220 to the North Carolina line.