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HORRY PUSHES SOUTH ON I-73

Travis Tritten The Sun News

Horry County says it will fight to get the last leg of Interstate 73 shifted south from its planned route, which critics
 say could stall the project for years, damage the environment and cost taxpayers more money.

The plan to shift I-73 to somewhere south of U.S. 501 was introduced by County Councilman John Boyd and supported unanimously by the council Tuesday.
It is expected to draw heated opposition from environmental groups because any southern route must cross the Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge.

``Frankly, I think we have time to fight them, and let's fight them right now," Boyd said during a speech from the council dais Tuesday night.

Once complete, I-73 would link the Myrtle Beach area with Michigan, providing a new interstate route for visitors from the Midwest. About 90 miles of interstate, worth about $2 billion, would cross through South Carolina.

Fifteen years of work and various studies already have gone into I-73.

Last month, proposed routes were released showing the highway is planned on S.C. 22, also known as Veterans Highway, from Conway to Myrtle Beach.

A southern path would provide a needed evacuation route and could protect farms around Aynor, Galivants Ferry and Cool Spring that now are threatened by the planned interstate highway, said Boyd who represents those areas.

About 40 residents in Aynor and Cool Spring turned out to oppose the proposed I-73 routes, which are far from being approved.

Boyd said the planned routes are not logical because the decision was deferred to environmental groups at the expense of residents.

``It is not right to treat the people of the county this way," Boyd said. ``It is really an issue of people against swamps."

State Rep. Alan Clemmons, R-Myrtle Beach and president of the S.C. I-73 Association, said an attempt now to move the route father south could cause years of delay.

He said he understands the concern in Boyd's district, but ``if the interstate is to be constructed, we must accept the idea that landowners somewhere are going to be impacted."

The project is no ordinary state road but rather ``a highway of huge economic significance to all of South Carolina," he said.

Even if conservation groups did not fight, the DOT would have to pass a resolution to change the corridor study area and the studies would have to start over, he said.

There is little chance environmental groups would not fight a southern route. ``We really are very much opposed. It just doesn't make sense," said Jack Peachey, president of the Waccamaw Audubon Society. ``We would bring a lawsuit; that is a guarantee."

The area considered for the new highway was cut by more than half in July to avoid major environmental resources such as the Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge.

Changing the routes now would mean ``starting over at square one," said Nancy Cave, director of the north coast office of the Coastal Conservation League.

The path of least damage to communities and environmental areas already has been chosen, Cave said.

Using S.C. 22 saves money because the road needs only improvements, and shifting the route will mean spending more on construction and damaging more property, said Pam Creech, who represents the Sierra Club on the I-73 Stakeholder Working Group.

``I would prefer, monetarily, for the taxpayers that they use the roads we have already built," Creech said.

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