

Posted on Wed, Mar. 28, 2007

House passes DOT reform bill

Proposal gives governor power to pick transportation secretary

By Zane Wilson

The Sun News

COLUMBIA - After a more than three-hour floor battle, the House passed a Department of Transportation reform bill 104-3 Tuesday, with local legislators saying they don't like parts of the measure but that it will produce a better agency.

That is, if the Senate plays along, and that is uncertain.

The Senate has been debating its own version of a bill off and on for three weeks with no consensus, and last week it approved a new structure that gives legislators the power to set road priorities.

Senators said they will work on the bill again today.

The DOT controls both state and federal road money and sets priorities for construction and maintenance, so its workings are important to traffic-clogged areas such as parts of Horry and Georgetown counties.

"I thank this body for doing something the Senate hasn't had the courage to do," said Rep. Annette Young, R-Summerville, who led the House subcommittee that spent hours in hearings and preparing a bill.

Legislators from Horry and Georgetown counties tried to get changes in the bill that would allow only the legislative delegation from a highway district to elect the commissioner. The legislation calls for an election by all lawmakers.

Passage came on second reading of the bill. Third reading, set for today, is routine.

"Most of us think there is some improvement there," said Rep. Nelson Hardwick, R-Surfside Beach.

The main points of the bill give the governor the power to appoint a secretary of transportation, who would be part of the Cabinet. The secretary and staff would set priorities based on specific criteria that include elements such as traffic count and population growth.

The commission would approve the priorities but could not change them. Members would also approve all contracts, which are currently handled by the staff.

The commission would have seven members, one from each highway engineering district. Commissioners would have to live in a district and have transportation-related experience.

They would have to pass through a screening panel and be elected by all legislators in a joint session.

Currently, the commission is elected from the six congressional districts by the legislative delegation from the district. There are no formal requirements, and there is no screening panel.

Rep. Thad Viers, R-Myrtle Beach, was among House members who tried to pass a change that would have the commissioners elected by lawmakers from their district.

The amendment was proposed by Rep. Jackie Hayes, D-Hamer, who represents part of Horry County.

Rep. Harry Ott, D-St. Matthews, said rural districts have different road needs than urban areas, and the commission elections would be dominated by urban legislators.

"Greenville County is going to have a much larger input on who the roads commissioner in my county is going to be than I have," Ott said.

"You're fixing to throw the bill right back where it was before, and we'll be in the same situation," said Young, who was among those arguing that the commissioners need to take a broad statewide approach.

The proposal was tabled 70-35. It split the local delegation in half. For the amendment were Viers; Hayes; Rep. Vida Miller, D-Pawleys Island; Rep. Jim Battle, D-Nichols; and Rep. Carl Anderson, D-Georgetown. Against it and voting to kill it were Hardwick, Rep. Liston Barfield, R-Aynor; Rep. Alan Clemmons, R-Myrtle Beach; Rep. Tracy Edge, R-North Myrtle Beach; and Rep. Billy Witherspoon, R-Conway.

Edge and Clemmons proposed an amendment to do away with the commission.

"If today is about reform, then let's talk about true reform," Edge said. "Make one person accountable for the actions of the DOT."

It was tabled 71-36, with most of the local delegation in favor. Against the proposal were Miller and Battle.

Viers said the new district will be good for Horry and Georgetown counties because it puts them in the Pee Dee Region with Florence, Marion, Darlington and others. He also likes the tightened contract approval system.

Hardwick also likes the new districts, saying that with the common interest in Interstate 73 and the North Eastern Strategic Alliance working together, the two counties will be better off than they were in a district with Charleston.

Gov. Mark Sanford praised the House for passing the bill, though his spokesman said it is still not a true cabinet agency without the governor's input on selection of commissioners.

---

At a glance

Main points of the Department of Transportation reform bill:

Would give the governor power to appoint a secretary of transportation, who would be part of the Cabinet;

The secretary and staff would set priorities;

The commission would approve the priorities but could not change them;

Members would approve all contracts;

The commission would have seven members, one from each highway engineering district.