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I-3 might go through S.C.

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Opposition to a new freeway in Georgia has sparked plans to re-route part of the highway through western South Carolina.

U.S. Rep. Paul Broun, R-Ga., said he wants the federal government to study an alternative route for Interstate 3 from Augusta to Greenville or Clinton. He may seek a change in federal law to require that.

As originally planned, the proposed road from Savannah to Knoxville would cross the Blue Ridge mountains in northeast Georgia.

That has upset environmentalists and some citizens groups in Georgia. They say I-3 would wreck the landscape, pollute clear-running mountain creeks and cost too much.

Broun, a first-term congressman up for re-election, said he favors building the road from Savannah to Augusta to spur economic development. But he also said it makes sense to look at South Carolina for the remainder of the freeway.

“There are always environmental impacts from a highway, but it would be much less on the South Carolina side than on the Georgia side,” Broun said.

While conservationists are glad Broun opposes the road across Georgia’s mountains, they say routing it through South Carolina only shifts the environmental impact from one state to another. Conservationists say a new freeway could bring sprawling development to the pastoral area between Augusta and Greenville or Clinton.

“I’m a South Carolinian, and I don’t want some big highway running through here because some congressman wants to feather his own nest,” said Buzz Williams, the Chattooga Conservancy’s director. “His idea of what is good for us may not be what our organization thinks is best for us.”

The Chattooga Conservancy, the Stop I-3 Coalition, the S.C. Wildlife Federation and the state Sierra Club are among those concerned. The conservancy and Stop I-3 say there is no need for the road. Upstate Forever will discuss its concerns during a board meeting later this month.

“I don’t know how this is going to benefit South Carolinians,” said Cary Chamblee, a lobbyist for the state Sierra Club and the S.C. Wildlife Federation.

Broun, however, said the idea at least warrants examination, if for no other reason than the cost. By its own estimates, the Stop I-3 Coalition says it could cost \$25 million per mile to run the road through Georgia's rugged mountains.

The congressman said he has no specific route in mind, but a new section of freeway could be built through non-mountainous terrain and link Augusta to I-26 at Clinton or I-85 near Greenville.

Broun said other options are tying in with I-20 or widening U.S. 25 in South Carolina. The U.S. highway enters the Palmetto State near Augusta, winds its way through mostly rural land, then crosses into North Carolina in the mountains above Greenville.

U.S. Rep. Gresham Barrett, R-S.C., who represents northwest South Carolina, supports a study of a possible route through the Palmetto State, a spokeswoman said Friday.

A spokesman for Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., was less enthusiastic.

The senator's focus is getting funding for I-73 to Myrtle Beach, Graham spokesman Kevin Bishop said. Bishop also noted that a new highway must be paid for, partially through state funds — meaning the state might balk.

"I-73 is the top dog in South Carolina," Bishop said. "We're still a long ways away from that road, even though we've made a lot of progress."

Interstate 3 was originally supported by Rep. Charles Norwood, a Georgia Republican who died. It obtained interstate status through a 2004 law approved by Congress, which has since approved \$1.3 million for a feasibility study of the route through Georgia.

The new road would be a major route for the port of Savannah to link with the Knoxville area. It also could be of use to the federal government's nuclear weapons facilities. It would pass near the Savannah River Site in Aiken County and continue to near the Oak Ridge nuclear complex in Tennessee.

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