

I-73 among one of many steps forward for NESAs

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The North Eastern Strategic Alliance (NESAs) moved forward on many of its major objectives in 2007 and expects to move closer to completion of projects in the new year. NESAs is a partnership between elected officials and private sponsors that serves to promote economic development in Chesterfield, Darlington, Dillon, Florence, Georgetown, Horry, Marion, Marlboro and Williamsburg counties.

One of NESAs's major projects includes promoting the construction of Interstate 73. In 2007, NESAs supported the the S.C. Department of Transportation's plans to begin buying property for the southern route of I-73, the proposed interstate from Michigan to Myrtle Beach.

About \$100 million has been identified for the construction of I-73. The Environmental Impact Study for the southern portion, which will travel through three NESAs counties — Dillon, Marion and Horry — was completed.

Another project includes studying the feasibility of a regional airport to serve the NESAs region in a triangle area consisting of Florence, Myrtle Beach and Wilmington, N.C. In 2007, Wilbur Smith and Associates of Columbia began a study for NESAs to gauge the need for an airport.

Other projects that have NESAs officials' support include construction of an international convention center in Myrtle Beach and the building of Santee Cooper's coal-fired power generating station on the Great Pee Dee River in Florence County. About \$10 million has been raised to buy property for an international convention center.

NESAs also supports strategies to enhance the growth of commerce and industry for its member counties.

In the first quarter of 2007, NESAs reported its Web site, SCBusinessCorner.com, received about 23,000 hits in January. In July, the Web site generated about 33,000 hits. The site gives detailed information for potential clients searching for sites to locate business and industry. The site was developed in June 2006.

NESAs also backed a two-for-one grant program that eventually allowed for \$10 million in state grants to be used by the Grand Strand for additional marketing and product development of tourism. That program is estimated to have returned more than \$100 million in additional revenue for Grand Strand tourism interests.

In May, NESAs hosted a visit to the NESAs region by consultant Mark Sweeney, senior principal at McCallum Sweeney Consulting Inc. and a former employee of the S.C.

Department of Commerce, to perpetuate project leads. Sweeney said the region's advantages include transportation with direct access to major seaports, labor availability, and a strong offering of sites and buildings with good existing infrastructure.

In addition to bringing site location experts to the area, NESAs took its show on the road. This past summer, a NESAs economic development team traveled to Florida to meet with executives to target opportunities for expansions and relocations to the NESAs region. Officials touted the low cost of land; state and local incentives; and the abundance of labor and an extensive transportation network. The Florida mission netted five active projects.

A NESAs team also traveled to Greenville and Atlanta in June and met with more than 10 site location consultants. NESAs representatives made trips to Ohio, Texas, Europe and Japan during the summer and fall to meet with prospects.

In 2008, NESAs officials expect to be informed by consultants if a regional airport is needed. If it is, a study will be conducted to determine where it should be placed; then funding would have to be obtained. If an airport is deemed necessary, it might be 15 to 20 years before it is built.

NESAs officials also will continue to pursue funding in order to keep plans to build I-73 progressing. More funding also will be sought to build the international convention center in Myrtle Beach.

Santee Cooper should have an Environmental Impact Study on the area where it's planning to build its new power plant completed in 2008. NESAs plans to promote the building of that power plant as an economic development tool for the region.