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I-73 feud: Lawmakers battle S.C. DNR Proposed interstate preserve crossing site in question

By Zane Wilson - The Sun News

Local legislators are fed up with what they say is stalling by the Department of Natural Resources on the crucial Interstate 73 crossing of the Little Pee Dee River Heritage Preserve.

At least one lawmaker plans to travel to the DNR board meeting Friday to let members know his concerns. He and others also are refusing to sign the papers for final acquisition of a large conservation parcel in Marion County until the I-73 issue is settled.

The interstate would be the first to connect with Horry County, and the section between S.C. 22 and I-95 is ready for its federal permits, except for an agreement on the preserve crossing.

Three months after the DNR board turned down an offer of \$450,000 for the 30-acre crossing site on Little Pee Dee River adjacent to the existing S.C. 917 bridge, and nearly a year after the state Department of Transportation proposed the crossing, the DNR has not answered the proposal or said what it wants, at least not publicly.

Negotiations are ongoing, said a DOT commissioner and a spokesman for the agency's chief.

Joe Young, who represents Horry and Georgetown counties on the DOT Commission, said DNR made a counteroffer but he does not know what it is. He thinks the two agencies are close to an agreement.

"I'm hoping they will hurry up because it's holding up the project," Young said.

DNR Director John Frampton said Transportation Secretary Buck Limehouse "knows exactly what we are doing." But he would not explain to The Sun News what the agency is doing.

"We are not holding I-73 up in any way, and the legislators know this," Frampton said in an e-mail interview. "There is absolutely no way that DNR would be holding up I-73 at this point, even if we wanted to."

He also said he was not aware of any legislators holding up agency paperwork over the issue, but Rep. Jim Battle, D-Nichols, said he personally told Frampton that the Marion County delegation will not sign final approval of about 20,000 acres of a new heritage preserve until the I-73 crossing issue is resolved.

In 11 years in the House, "I've been their champion," when there were preserves to be acquired and scenic rivers to be designated, Battle said. So it pains him to oppose DNR, "but this is something really important to my county."

Struggling Marion County sees I-73 as an opportunity for growth and development that it would not otherwise have.

Frampton would not say what the DNR wants for the crossing, Battle said.

So Battle intends to go to the DNR board meeting on Friday in Florence and tell the seven members what he thinks about the agency's failure to act and that he will not allow the new property to be added until something is done.

Battle said the money that was offered for the property is eight to nine times its appraised value, and even after it pays, the DOT will also have to compensate for the loss of wetland.

"That's state money moving from one place to another," Battle said.

Rep. Billy Witherspoon, R-Conway, is another who is frustrated with the situation and says taxpayers should not have to pay twice for land they already own.

"The taxpayers are paying for this property twice. I just think it's wrong," Witherspoon said. "DNR doesn't own any land, they are the custodians of it."

Witherspoon chairs the House committee that oversees the DNR and said he has told the agency he intends to hold up any bills it wants next year if the crossing issue is still unresolved.

He said that as another way to make his point, he agreed to Gov. Mark Sanford's veto of \$500,000 for a DNR project and asked other lawmakers to allow the veto to stand, which it did.

Witherspoon also is annoyed that the agency's leaders will not say what they want.

"I had John Frampton and Mike McShane in my office and they would not give me an answer," Witherspoon said. McShane chairs the DNR board.

"I don't know what they want, but I am very much upset with them," said State Rep. Tracy Edge, R-North Myrtle Beach. Edge is a member of the budget-writing House Ways and Means Committee. He said he cut about \$3 million out of DNR's budget earlier this year because of the mistrust local legislators have for the agency.

Edge's beef is not just over the I-73 crossing, though that adds to the fire.

Several years ago, DNR eliminated most county offices including Horry's because of budget cuts and opted for regional offices instead.

"I'm going to keep cutting them until they open our office back up," Edge said.

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