

## **I-73 land purchase approved**

By Zane Wilson - The Sun News

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COLUMBIA --The state Budget and Control Board on Thursday approved the last piece of the puzzle needed for final federal approval of the southern leg of Interstate 73.

The board agreed without discussion to the sale of 30 acres of the Little Pee Dee River Heritage Preserve at S.C. 917 on the Horry County border to the state Department of Transportation for \$750,000.

Approval was needed before the Federal Highway Administration could authorize the 30-mile section of I-73 between Interstate 95 near Latta and S.C. 22 between Aynor and Conway.

The final approval, called a Record of Decision, is expected to be signed in a few weeks.

When that is done, the DOT will start negotiations to buy about 60 pieces of property that are in the path of the road, said Mitchell Metts, I-73 project manager.

Although the exact layout of the road is not yet determined, those parcels are definitely in its path, he said. When the exact route is laid out, the DOT will begin buying that property.

The agency will soon ask for proposals from consultants to draw the road's layout within the corridor that has been approved, Metts said.

Acquisition of a portion of the Little Pee Dee Heritage preserve has been under review for nearly two years. The interstate must cross the Little Pee Dee River somewhere, and studies showed the crossing at S.C. 917 would be the least environmentally damaging.

Also, the existing S.C. 917 bridge over the Little Pee Dee is outdated and scheduled for replacement, which would also require damage to the preserve.

The I-73 bridge is to be just south of the existing S.C. 917 bridge. Both will likely be built at the same time to avoid excess damage to the preserve.

Preserves get special protection under federal highway law, so the transfer had to be done with the approval of the property's managers to meet with the Federal Highway Administration's rules.

The Heritage Trust Advisory Board had to approve the sale, as did the state Department of Natural Resources Board.

The money will be used to buy other land for the Heritage Trust program.

The DOT has about \$80 million on hand to buy the I-73 right of way, Metts said.

I-73 is planned to connect Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., with the Myrtle Beach area. Parts of the road are in the planning stage, under construction or finished in North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia.

The northern portion of I-73 in South Carolina, between I-95 and Interstate 74 near Hamlet, N.C., is expected to have its final preferred route approved later this year.

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