

## **I-73 route will be re-examined**

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Interstate 73's proposed route through Henry County will be re-examined to see if it can better accommodate industries and the Martinsville Speedway.

The Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) on Thursday, acting on a request by the Henry County Board of Supervisors, adopted a resolution to that effect. The vote was unanimous among the board's 17 members, with Dana Martin of Roanoke, who represents the area on the board, making the motion.

I-73's planned route — approved by state transportation officials — runs through the county east of Martinsville.

The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) together will look at whether I-73 can be rerouted to incorporate a connector road to the Patriot Centre at Beaver Creek industrial park, as well as offer better access to the Martinsville Industrial Park and the speedway, according to the resolution and a CTB report.

After hearing concerns from area business leaders about the interstate's planned route, county supervisors last fall adopted a resolution asking the state to re-evaluate the route.

"Henry County has some valid issues they want us to consider," said David Fierro, VDOT's Richmond-based assistant director for public affairs.

Working with the FHWA, VDOT will try to determine some alternate routes for I-73, but "a lot of re-engineering work will need to be done," Fierro said, such as re-examining aerial photography and topographical maps of the area and figuring out where rights of way may need to be acquired.

"At this point, we don't know ... how long it's going to take" to try and determine some alternate routes, he said.

Results of the route's re-examination are to be reported to the CTB, the resolution says. Also, if any alternate routes are determined, they will be presented for discussion at public meetings, said Fierro.

"Anytime something significant changes" with a highway project, such as a route, "we need to go back to the public" for input, he added. "We want to be as transparent as possible" in deciding highway routes.

Plans to start the construction process for I-73 technically are on hold until a lawsuit is resolved, Fierro pointed out.

Virginians for Appropriate Roads, an activist group, filed suit in federal court in Richmond in October, claiming “significant, irreversible and adverse effects on natural, scenic, and ecological resources” will occur if I-73 is built.

The CTB resolution directs VDOT to “take any action it deems appropriate without prejudicing or otherwise affecting the litigation, the federal funding and the advancement of the project.”

Due to the lawsuit and not having enough funding yet to start construction, Fierro said he thinks re-examining I-73’s route will not hinder progress toward getting the interstate built.

About \$13.3 million in federal and state funds have been reserved for I-73 so far, officials have said. But the total construction cost for the interstate’s entire route through southwest Virginia, from Roanoke to the North Carolina line, is estimated at \$4 billion. That includes preliminary work as well as the actual construction.

VDOT’s Six-Year Improvement Program includes the construction of 3.6 miles of I-73 near Martinsville to start in 2011, but officials have said the construction probably will not begin that year. Preliminary work such as designing the highway and acquiring rights of way must occur first.

According to officials, the 2011 date basically was just “a placeholder” on the project list that was necessary to get federal funds, and there really is nothing to base it on.