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I-73 Wins Crucial Backer

U.S. Transportation Chief Views MB Needs

By Travis Tritten and Zane Wilson - The Sun News

The head of the U.S. Department of Transportation and Sen. Lindsey Graham surveyed one of the area's most congested intersections Friday and vowed support for a planned interstate highway to the beach.

DOT Secretary Mary Peters visited the intersection of U.S. 501 and Carolina Forest Boulevard around 11 a.m., watching a solid line of traffic as far as she could see.

"It is time to build I-73," Peters said. "We are doing what we can to ensure 501 does not become the biggest parking lot in South Carolina."

Peters is the "most powerful person in Washington when it comes to transportation needs" and the visit will help draw crucial federal support for Interstate 73, said Graham.

Peters' visit to the busy intersection was a side trip from her main purpose for coming to Myrtle Beach, which was to promise support to the newly reorganized National I-73 Corridor Association.

She told the 200 people who attended the I-73 meeting that she learned something at the intersection.

"It isn't called 'Grand Strand gridlock' for nothing," Peters said.

The federal DOT can award funding for road projects such as I-73, and the secretary sets priorities that can be influential when Congress is doling out road funding.

Peters said national transportation policy is not working, and a prime example is "the 25 years just to build I-73."

Those are the years since the road was first identified by Congress as a need, she said.

"It has taken us far too long to get to this point," Peters said.

The highway will connect the Grand Strand with Michigan and help ease traffic jams on local roads, such as U.S. 501 and Carolina Forest Boulevard where Peters and Graham viewed vehicles queued up into the distance.

The highway would draw 2 million to 3 million more visitors to the area annually, spur job growth and allow a quicker evacuation when a hurricane hits the coast, said Brad Dean, president of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce.

"To make this happen, we have to expose the problem to the people in Washington," Graham said. "After this visit, I believe it will be easier for me and this delegation to sell this project."

I-73 is a national need, not just a local one, and its place in the system will become even more crucial when the Panama Canal is expanded in the next few years, Peters said. Shippers are waiting to use a larger canal to come to East Coast ports and they will need better connections, such as I-73.

Her agency is committed to pushing for projects such as I-73 that serve large corridors rather than spending money on isolated projects that serve comparatively few, Peters said.

Graham told the group that Peters is "the most important person in America when it comes to building roads," and that her understanding of I-73 is significant.

But it is also important for a corridor-wide group of supporters to work on the project, Graham said.

"Working together, these six states can build an interstate highway that will benefit us all," Graham said.

The other member states "honor us" by basing the organization in South Carolina, "and we're going to deliver for you," he promised.

The corridor association lay dormant after about 1995. Dean agreed to take it over and will be its executive director. The chamber has agreed to put in \$50,000 to get the organization going and has hired a coordinator.

State Rep. Alan Clemmons, R-Myrtle Beach, was elected chairman of the new group. He is also president of the S.C. I-73 Association.

Representatives from the transportation departments of South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia described what their states have done and are planning.

Ohio and Michigan halted work on I-73 in the late 1990s, but supporters who attended from those states said they intend to go home and try to get the ball rolling again.

"I had no idea the amount of new construction that was going on down

here," said Ann Hughes, president of the Adrian Area Chamber of Commerce in Adrian, Mich.

She said she will work on reactivating the Michigan I-73 association and put it to work urging the Michigan DOT to put the road back on the planning table.

Steve Carter, director of Scioto County Economic Development in Portsmouth, Ohio, said he was involved in the earlier corridor association and continues to believe the highway is necessary for his area in southern Ohio.

He said he intends to discuss the road with the administration in Ohio and help to reactivate his state's I-73 association.

Besides working on renewed I-73 support in their own states, members of the corridor association plan a gathering in Washington in the fall to meet with the legislative delegation from the six states and to lobby other key members, Clemmons said.

"We're now focused on the 2009 highway reauthorization bill," he said. County officials were also pleased at the attention from Peters.

"It is sounding to me like they promised the funding [for I-73] and it's a good day for Horry County," County Administrator Danny Knight said.

County Councilman Marion Foxworth, whose district covers Carolina Forest, said the county has done "more than its fair share" of road improvements and the visit Friday was an encouraging sign that the federal government is behind a crucial upgrade.

South Carolina | Almost ready to file for permits to build 40-mile section between S.C. 22 and I-95; almost finished with preliminary plans for section between I-95 and I-74 in North Carolina

North Carolina | Of 370-mile corridor for I-73 and I-74, 19 miles of I-74 and two miles of I-73 are built; more will open this year and other contracts will be awarded early next year.

Virginia | Received permits for its main 70-mile section in March, now looking for money to build it.

West Virginia | Of a 150-mile corridor, six miles are built and 11 are under construction; 25 more miles ready for construction

Online | New National I-73/74 Corridor Association Web site: www.I73.com