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## I-73 Would Ease Traffic, Official Says

By The Augusta Chronicle - Georgia / Associated Press

Transportation Secretary Mary Peters stood near a highway snarled with three miles of beach traffic Friday and said an Interstate 73, which could one day link Michigan to South Carolina, was badly needed.

"For too long this project has been stalled in an endless jam of studies, findings and reviews," Ms. Peters said. "It's time to move forward and move on."

Some sections of I-73, a proposed 1,100-mile road, have been built. Eventually, plans are for the road to wind from northern Michigan to South Carolina, weaving through Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia and North Carolina.

The interstate will run 90 miles across South Carolina, giving the 14 million tourists who visit the Myrtle Beach area each year their first direct interstate link to the Grand Strand. The area's beaches are the heart of South Carolina's \$16 billion tourism industry.

"It should take one hour to travel the 65 miles from I-95 to Myrtle Beach. Because of all the traffic, the slower speeds and all the stoplights, it can sometimes take hours to get here," Ms. Peters said. "What one time was a very pleasant drive has turned into a long trial of traffic and frustration."

The South Carolina leg of the new interstate is expected to cost about \$2 billion. State lawmakers have approved tolls to help pay for the new road, and U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said \$100 million in federal money has been set aside.

"That's not enough to build the road, but it is enough to get started," Mr. Graham said. "To people who depend on the tourist economy, help is on the way. To the people who want to come to South Carolina, you're going to have an avenue you didn't have sooner rather than later."

Environmental studies for the first phase are expected to be completed this year, and Ms. Peters promised officials would move quickly to grant approvals and allow construction to begin.

Ms. Peters said I-73 is important to the East Coast.

"Right now, I-95, which is the major north-south corridor in this part of the country, is overburdened. It's far over capacity for the amount of traffic it's carrying," she said. "All six states realize how important I-73 is to allow commerce to continue to grow in this area."

Buck Limehouse, the executive director of the state Transportation Department, said the interstate also would help in the event of a hurricane evacuation. His agency has made the interstate a top priority.

While the Myrtle Beach area attracts millions of visitors, an estimated 2 million more potential visitors stay away because it's just too congested to get to the beach, said Brad Dean, the executive director of the local chamber of commerce.