

I-73 project gets toll approval

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There is a major development in the quest to build Interstate 73. Friday the U.S. Department of Transportation gave approval to make the interstate a toll road. That approval could pave the way to funding the multi-billion dollar road.

As part of a federal pilot program, I-73 will be the first of three projects to get an exception to the federal law that prohibits interstate tolls.

"It's another step in a big trend in the United States to more toll based financing for major infrastructure projects," said Tyler Duvall with the U.S. Department of Transportation."

However, the approval to charge tolls doesn't mean it will happen.

Each state in the route from Michigan to South Carolina may decide if their portion will have tolls. South Carolina's Transportation Secretary said tolls could help build the road faster and cheaper.

"It will help us pay for the road because we can't proceed beyond the right of way acquisitions with the funds that we have on hand right now," said Buck Limehouse.

The I-73 Project manager said the decision to toll I-73 would most likely be made by South Carolina D.O.T., the Federal Highway Administration and elected officials.

If they decide tolls are the way to go, the question remains, how to pay for that? Private funding is one option.

"Have the private capital invest in the roads and they get the tolls to pay off their investment and if the numbers work out right then everybody wins," said Gary Loftus.

Crunching those numbers will be just another part of the process.

As of now, South Carolina's portion of I-73 is expected to cost about \$2 billion.

I-73 planners hope to get federal approval on the environmental impact plans for The Palmetto State's leg of the route during the next year.