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I-73 compensation plan delayed

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By Zane Wilson - The Sun News

COLUMBIA --A proposal to compensate for the Interstate 73 crossing of a nature preserve will be delayed at least a few more weeks.

The state Department of Transportation had planned to present a possible compensation package to the state Heritage Trust Advisory Board on Thursday, but the two agencies were not close enough to an agreement to do so, both sides said.

Mitchell Metts, I-73 project manager for the state DOT, said negotiations between high-level DOT and Department of Natural Resources staff were under way but there was not enough time to finish a proposal for Thursday.

"It's imminent," Metts said. "I think we've made good progress toward it."

No one is holding up negotiations, he said, adding that it is a complicated issue and both agencies want to have the proposal as detailed and complete as possible before presenting it.

Federal law requires the DOT to compensate for wetland loss, but compensation for damage to a nature preserve is more strict. The crossing, adjacent to the existing S.C. 917 bridge, is expected to affect 27 acres.

"We're still talking about it," said Barry Beasley, DNR staff manager for the Heritage Trust program.

In the meantime, the Heritage Trust board will prepare a report on the possible effects of the crossing for the Department of Natural Resources board to consider at its May 18 meeting.

Shortly after that meeting, a special meeting of the Heritage Trust board would probably be called to consider the DOT's proposal, Beasley said.

He said DNR board Chairman Mike McShane asked for the report last month because that board's members have not heard all the information and discussion about the project that the Heritage board has.

The Heritage Trust board has discussed the project at some level for four meetings, since August. It meets only quarterly.

Heritage Trust board Chairwoman Julia Krebs said she thinks members are aware of the significance of the project and most will be able to come to a special meeting.

Their decision is not binding on the DNR board.

David Farren, an attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center in Chapel Hill, N.C., told the board there is no need for the highway to cross the Little Pee Dee Heritage Preserve.

The road should avoid the preserve by following the existing S.C. 9 or U.S. 501 corridors, Farren said.

He said the decision is a precedent-setting one, and that federal law does not allow preserves to be disrupted by a road unless there is no alternative.

There is "a very special landscape along the Little Pee Dee River" between S.C. 9 and U.S. 501 and "the worst choice" is to put the highway between the two existing roads, he said.

Metts, who did not attend the meeting, said the agency's preliminary studies show that the environmental damage would be worse along both the S.C. 9 and U.S. 501 corridors.

The 917 crossing is the least damaging, not just to the preserve but for the entire route, Metts said, adding that the DOT has the numbers to back up its plan.

Since the plan was released last year, the DOT has done more on-the-ground work and field studies that have confirmed that position, Metts said.

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