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I-73 DELAY FRUSTRATING

Last week was supposed to be the week Congress disgorged at last the six-year transportation bill that includes up-front money for Interstate 73 and a connector between Carolina Bays Parkway and U.S. 701 near Georgetown. But even though the general outlines of the bill have been clear for at least a year - this originally was supposed to be a 2004 bill - House and Senate conferees couldn't agree on a final version for a vote in both houses.

This is frustrating beyond measure, as the S.C. Department of Transportation has made I-73 its top priority and has narrowed its corridor to Myrtle Beach down to a connection to S.C. 22 somewhere near Aynor. Congress is expected to provide at least \$20 million toward preliminary work on the S.C. segment of the road, which will cross into North Carolina in northern Marlboro County. The N.C. Department of Transportation earlier this year promised to link the road from the state line to its inland interstate complex. That would allow travelers to get to the beach from an Interstate 95 exit near Dillon or from the east-west interstates that flow into Charlotte.

Congress last week shut down federal highway money flowing to the states in hopes that howls of outrage from the home folks would give conferees greater incentive to finish work on the compromise bill. The hope must be that they finish the bill this week and that Congress votes it into law soon after. Residents of Horry County and the Pee Dee have waited long enough for definitive word that their first interstate link with the rest of the country is for real.

Meanwhile, back in South Carolina ...

With their approval of a State Infrastructure Bank bond issue last week, S.C. Department of Transportation commissioners ensured that two remaining Horry County Road Improvement Development Effort projects will be completed. The decision won't speed up completion of the Fantasy Harbour waterway bridge in Myrtle Beach and Main Street Connector waterway bridge in North Myrtle Beach. Engineering constraints dictate that both projects will be finished in 2008 - possibly later. But it's great that local doubts the completion money will be there have been removed. Thanks to the bank board and the DOT commissioners for making sure that the bond issue meets Horry County's needs.

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