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I-73 LOOKS PROMISING

Observing the making of laws is rarely pleasant, especially when the law in question has to do with distributing federal money among the states. In situations such as the reauthorization of federal transportation programs, lawmaking becomes a spectacle of excess.

But when a state really needs a new highway project, as South Carolina really needs Interstate 73, the spectacle becomes tolerable to watch if things go well. By that standard, the unfolding of this highway bill has become tolerable, even pleasant, to watch. That's because the Grand Strand's House member, U.S. Rep. Henry Brown, R-Hanahan, has been appointed to the conference committee that will reconcile the House's version of the transportation bill with the Senate's. Also representing the House on the committee is U.S. Rep. John Spratt, D-York, who represents the Pee Dee counties through which I-73 will flow on its way to North Carolina. Both Brown and Spratt fought hard for money for I-73 as the House developed its transportation bill in 2004 and this year and deserve great credit for that.

U.S. Sen. Jim DeMint, R-Greenville, also will be on the transportation conference committee. Whether that's good news will depend on how passionately the freshman senator works for the project. DeMint's enthusiasm for the project is suspect because he, along with U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-Seneca, voted against the Senate's \$295 billion version of the six-year transportation bill last month. On sweeps through Horry County during last year's campaign, he had portrayed himself as a passionate supporter of the project.

Now, DeMint has a chance to redeem himself. His immediate task is to make sure that the \$11 billion gap between the Senate bill and the \$284 billion House bill isn't closed at the expense of I-73, for which the House has allotted \$20 million. DeMint also should work with Spratt and Brown to sweeten the formula by which federal transportation dollars are funneled to the states in South Carolina's favor. Right now, the state gets back fewer federal gasoline-tax dollars than it sends to Washington.

Most important, DeMint should keep his 2004 campaign-season promise to toil for continuing federal funding for I-73 - an absolute necessity if the \$2 billion S.C. portion of the project ever is to be completed. He should join Brown in working to designate the project a so-called Highway of Regional and National Significance. Given the northeast S.C. coast's dearth of storm evacuation routes, that shouldn't be too hard to accomplish.

It may take a strong stomach to witness the transportation bill spectacle, considering that both bills contain projects that strike many Americans as frivolous and wasteful. But because Horry County is the largest U.S. metro area that lacks an interstate link, I-73 doesn't fall into those categories. If DeMint, Brown and Spratt can put the project over the goal line, the excess in the bill will be much easier to endure.

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