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I-73 ROAD MONEY WEIGHED TO PAY FOR HURRICANE RELIEF Zane Wilson The Sun News

Supporters of Interstate 73 need to remain vigilant and stay in touch with their congressional delegation to stave off attempts to use road money for Hurricane Katrina relief, U.S. Rep. Henry Brown said Thursday.

The suggestion isn't given much credence at this time but can't be ignored, Brown said. "It's just talk at this point, but I can't discount it. I'm going to be fighting that all the way," he said.

The spokesman for U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said the distressed area must be aided but no plan has been decided.

"Senator Graham continues to explore various proposals to provide relief funding to the affected area in a fiscally responsible manner," Graham spokesman Kevin Bishop said. "While there are numerous options on the table, no specific decisions have yet been made."

U.S. Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., could not be reached.

The interstate, planned to connect Myrtle Beach and Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., received \$81 million in the highway bill. The \$286 billion bill also awarded \$4 million for a U.S. 701 connector to the Carolina Bays Parkway, and \$2.4 million to finish the parkway.

Discussion is whirling through the Capitol in Washington about how to pay to fix the destruction wrought by Katrina and Rita, and using the highway money is one of several proposals.

Brown, R-Hanahan, said he already has told the House leadership he will not go along with such a plan.

He said he has received some calls from constituents who support using the road money for hurricane-reconstruction relief until he tells them the highway funds come from the gas tax.

Many people think the road money comes from the general fund, he said.

"I don't think the American public wants to see their gas-tax money used for general appropriations," Brown said. "Hurricane relief ought to be a separate issue."

Brown said Congress is waiting on more specific damage estimates before beginning work on how to pay for repairs.

Many members think the damage estimates, such as for \$250 billion in New Orleans, are overinflated and include items that private insurance will cover.

Some officials in the affected areas also are asking for more than simply replacing what was lost, and that isn't likely to happen, Brown said.

“We can't just open up the checkbook,” he said.

Brown will be among several House members touring the area today to examine Veterans Affairs facilities damaged by the storms.

Brown is a member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee.

He said he will have a better idea of what should be done to repair the area after he sees it himself.

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