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I-73 CONSTRUCTION

I-73: Offer for preserve crossing rejected
DNR balks at offer of \$450,000 by DOT

By Zane Wilson - The Sun News

GARNETT --The state Department of Natural Resources Board rejected a \$450,000 offer Friday to compensate for the Interstate 73 crossing of the Little Pee Dee River Heritage Preserve.

Without discussion or a vote, the board accepted DNR Director John Frampton's recommendation that he negotiate a better deal with Buck Limehouse, newly appointed director of the state Department of Transportation.

"We need some further discussion on that," Frampton told the board, which was meeting at Webb Wildlife Center near the Hampton County village of Garnett.

Limehouse could not be reached for comment Friday.

The crossing, planned to run alongside the existing S.C. 917 bridge, is the biggest hurdle for the I-73 permits because federal law grants special protection to conservation land.

The S.C. DOT is ready to apply for construction permits for a 30-mile section between Interstate 95 and S.C. 22, but can't do so until the preserve crossing issue is worked out.

The crossing would take about 27 acres and construction of a new S.C. 917 bridge would take another 3 acres. But the damage and affect of the crossing go beyond that acreage, the agency's Heritage Trust Advisory Board said in a report to the DNR board.

"We do not want to hold up I-73," Frampton said, but the crossing issue is complicated and precedent-setting. Many interest groups are watching and "if we make a wrong decision, it's going to be detrimental to all of us," he said.

The written report was requested last month by DNR Board Chairman Mike McShane.

The \$450,000 offer had come from Tony Chapman, interim DOT director, before Limehouse was named agency chief earlier this month.

Chapman's letter said the same taxpayers who will be paying for the roads bought the preserve, so the DNR should give the land for the crossing.

But "because of the sensitive nature of the Little Pee Dee Heritage Preserve," the DOT was willing to offer \$450,000 to compensate for it.

The DNR could use the money to buy more conservation land in another location and for increased management costs at Little Pee Dee, Chapman said.

The Heritage Advisory Board's report said the preserve, which runs along the river between Horry and Marion counties, would be affected even if the I-73 crossing were moved farther south to avoid the preserve because it would still cause a fragmentation of habitat and have effects on preserve management.

"The committee recognized in this regard, it might be more practical to cross where an existing road already crosses the preserve, rather than disturb another portion of the Little Pee Dee River corridor," the report said.

That is the conclusion drawn by the DOT in its preliminary route plan, and agreed to by 15 other state and federal agencies that have participated in the I-73 plan, including the Environmental Protection Agency.

"Also it was stressed that the Heritage Trust Advisory Board has no interest in stopping or delaying this project but must exercise its responsibility for stewardship of South Carolina's heritage preserves," the report said.

The report found four direct effects the crossing would have on the preserve, but did not put a price on them:

Habitat loss in the acreage that will be taken;

Fragmentation of habitat, which could affect wildlife movements. "This would be an especially critical issue with regard to black bear," the report said.

"Habitat fragmentation is one of the most difficult and challenging impacts as we look at the overall impacts of growth with regard to maintaining high quality habitat for all types of wildlife," the report said.

Management of the property, particularly in restricting the use of controlled burning. Highway officials would not want smoke covering the road, which would make for a very narrow window of time to burn for woods management, the committee said.

If the agency could not burn, more expensive hand or mechanical work would be needed, the report also said.

The crossing will change the character of the preserve, the report said.

"Road noise and pollutants from vehicles would significantly impact the visitor experience to the preserve," the report said.

Chapman's letter, dated April 30, also asked the DNR to give the necessary approval of the crossing for the Federal Highway Administration to grant the construction permit.

Shane Belcher of the Federal Highway Administration told the board that disturbing the preserve would require a special analysis but if the DNR board agrees to the crossing, that analysis will not be required.

About I-73

Interstate 73 is planned to link Horry County with upper Michigan. North Carolina has already built some of its portion of the road, as has West Virginia.