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I-73 TOLLS: GOOD CALL

Some readers might have trouble seeing good news in the S.C. General Assembly's decision last week to designate Interstate 73 as a toll road. But we cheer the S.C. Senate for joining the House in approving an I-73 tolling bill. Without tolls, there is virtually no hope that the Grand Strand's first interstate link to the outside world would ever be built.

Congress, after all, has put only \$81 million toward the estimated \$2 billion cost of the 90-mile, limited-access highway - barely enough to pay for preliminary engineering work and environmental studies, and not enough to pay for large-scale dirt moving and asphalt pouring. The S.C. Department of Transportation, meanwhile, relies solely on the S.C. gasoline tax (among the lowest in the nation) and federal highway appropriations to pay for its projects. That agency has no money for I-73.

The I-73 tolling bill, which Gov. Mark Sanford has promised to sign, does not require the S.C. DOT to slap tolls on the highway, but only allows such. Nor does the bill say how much tolls should be. The measure's chief value is showing two key institutions, Congress and the S.C. Infrastructure Bank, that the state is committed to paying for the highway.

In Congress' case, this showing of fiscal willpower could spring loose future federal funding for the project. Congress last year set the stage for such cyclical funding by designating the S.C. part of I-73 a highway of national significance - a reflection not only of the road's economic-development potential for mostly impoverished northeast South Carolina but also of its value in evacuating the northeast coast when hurricanes approach.

As for the Infrastructure Bank, its board requires a local or state showing of financial effort before it will consider issuing state bonds for road projects. If the state can rake in, say, \$10 million a year in I-73 tolls, the bank can apply that money toward bonds to help cover more of the state's share of the project.

Beyond these advantages of tolls for I-73 lies the sad, hard fact that the days of free interstate highway construction are over and will never return. That's why Congress, in the 2005 omnibus transportation bill that includes the

br> \$81 million for I-73, envisions tolling as a chief means of financing new road projects nationally. Like it or not, this idea is here to stay, and S.C. legislators did well to recognize that.

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