

Input sought on I-73

Route option raises worries of delays
Sunday, April 29, 2007

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Martinsville Bulletin

The Henry County Board of Supervisors has asked a state official to address the impact of changing the proposed route of Interstate 73 in the county at the board's May meeting.

Axton businessman Max Kendall has proposed a route that he says better serves the area. It includes more interchanges and uses part of the existing U.S. 58 bypass. It goes east of Martinsville, as does the state's route, but is closer to the city.

Kendall said using the bypass would save up to \$150 million, shave years from the project and bring I-73 closer to Henry County's industrial parks such as the Patriot Centre as well as Patrick Henry Community College. He also said it is closer to existing water and sewer service and asked "who's going to pay the bill" to expand water and sewer service to the interchanges on the state-proposed route.

Supervisors Chairman H.G. Vaughn said the board needs more information on Kendall's proposal.

"His proposal looks and sounds good on paper, but I have not talked with VDOT (Virginia Department of Transportation) to find out what the effect of it would be as far as trying to change it at this stage of the game," he said.

As a result, Vaughn said supervisors have asked Richard Caywood, district administrator for VDOT's Salem office, to speak at the board's May meeting. The supervisors also want to ask Caywood what the next steps are now that a record of decision has been reached on I-73, Vaughn said.

Dana Martin, member of the Commonwealth Transportation Board for the Salem District which includes Henry County, said any change could delay the project. However, he is not opposed to discussing Kendall's proposed route, saying certain aspects of it are "definitely logical."

The question, Martin said, is how much deviating from the current plan will delay the project. He said Kendall's plan ceases to be attractive if any savings or efficiency are eaten up by inflation and delays.

Martin added that he does not want to do anything that causes "significant delays" in the project or "jeopardizes the project."

I-73 recently cleared an important hurdle when it received the record of decision that will allow design work to begin, although there is only about \$13 million available now for the approximately \$4 billion project.

Lisa Price Hughes, resident engineer for the local VDOT office, said significant changes to the route, as Kendall proposed, would mean the project may have to go back through the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) process that led to the recent record of decision.

Kendall was skeptical that this would have an effect, saying he had no knowledge of any environmental groundwork that had been done in the county. However, Hughes said a great deal of work on environmental impact assessments has been done to make sure I-73 complies with the NEPA, starting in 1992 and continuing as funding became available.

Martin said that if questions about how much the change might delay the project could be answered, he might be more likely to support Kendall's route if the Henry County Board of Supervisors passes a resolution endorsing it. Kendall said he has plans to go back to the supervisors, where he has discussed the route before, and Martinsville City Council to ask for such an endorsement.

Caywood was unavailable for comment Friday. Chuck Lionberger, spokesman for VDOT's Salem District Office, said it is too early to tell what effect changing the route would have.

There is no timeline for designing, buying rights of way or completing I-73, he said, so there is no way to know what changing the route would mean to the project, he said.

Kendall wants VDOT to hold a public meeting in which people could see the two routes and voice their preference.

Martin said that although he would be the appropriate person to bring a new route before the transportation board, he is one voice and his endorsement would not necessarily mean the board would support it.

Lionberger said officials are setting up meetings with state, local and federal officials to talk about what segment of I-73 to start with. Henry County officials such as the supervisors have made it clear they want I-73 to start at the North Carolina line for more immediate benefit to Henry County and Martinsville.

Lionberger said there is also no timetable to the meetings.