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INTERSTATE 73 BACKERS LOOK TO OTHER STATES

Zane Wilson The Sun News

COLUMBIA Michigan and Ohio have no construction planned for Interstate 73, and highway officials in those states don't know if they ever will.

``Ohio has no plans to pursue I-73," said Joel Hunt, Ohio Department of Transportation spokesman. ``It's not part of our long-range plan."

S.C. leaders view I-73 as critical to the region's future, but they say it won't fulfill its full potential if the road doesn't cover its complete six-state path between Myrtle Beach and Sault Ste. Marie, Mich.

``The truth is that South Carolina will not be economically impacted to its fullest without the full length," said state Rep. Alan Clemmons, R-Myrtle Beach, who is president of the S.C. I-73 Association.

Finding ways to get the other I-73 states kick-started on the highway is part of the task as a plane-load of Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce members heads Tuesday to Washington.

Chamber members, who made a similar trip last year, plan to lobby for Interstate 73, beach renourishment, airport and trade center money, and funds for pipes to carry stormwater into the ocean.

``It's a wonderful idea to keep the issues up front," said state Rep. Doug Jennings, D-Bennettsville, chairman of the North Eastern Strategic Alliance I-73 committee.

Part of the I-73 lobbying task this year is to encourage the S.C. congressional delegation to keep pushing representatives of the other five states the road traverses for money to keep the project on everyone's radar screens. The around 100 chamber members who are going are paying \$750 each for the trip.

I-73 is one of 44 priority corridors designated by Congress in 1991. Only five of those were to be interstates, but Congress never promised the road any money, so each state has had to piecemeal nibbles here and there for studies and engineering.

The road starts near Myrtle Beach at S.C. 22, and runs through North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Ohio and Michigan to its end at Sault Ste. Marie.

Few actual parts of I-73 have been built in the 14 years since it was designated. Michigan and Ohio have put the road on the back burner for lack of funds, while activity is picking up in South Carolina, North Carolina and Virginia.

Jennings said after the road was designated in 1991, the six states formed an association that was active for a few years, but it disintegrated as interest waned when no funding was given.

“I think the answer is trying to reorganize the corridor association” to have residents of the affected states lobbying their elected officials for money to make the highway happen, Jennings said.

Clemmons said getting a coordinated effort going with the other five states is the next priority after obtaining a secure funding stream for the road in South Carolina.

The business community in the other states has remained interested, and local chamber people have kept in contact with them over the years, so the seeds are there, Clemmons said.

“The business community generally believes that I-73 is a plan that has been forgotten,” but when they hear that the Carolinas are moving forward, “they suddenly see the door is open,” he said.

In Michigan, where the original end point in Detroit was moved to Sault Ste. Marie so the road could connect with Canada and become an international interstate, much preliminary work was done before plans were shelved for lack of funds.

“Right now we have it on hold; we’re not doing anything with it because of the funding,” said Deryl Holmes of Michigan’s Department of Transportation communications office.

Ohio also did a lot of the preliminary plans years ago but is not interested in the project at this time, and its DOT doesn’t know if it ever will be again, Hunt said.

Ohio needs to spend its money on upgrades and repairs of existing roads, he said.

Clemmons said the state DOT priorities in Ohio and Michigan can be changed if there is a public demand for the road and that is where a renewed I-73 association would come in.

West Virginia has worked steadily on planning and funding, and has much of its plans ready, said Jim Sothen, deputy state highway engineer of development.

The state has built a key interchange along the route, which is called King Coal Highway, through West Virginia.

“It is a priority with us, if we can find the funding,” Sothen said. “We still have quite a ways to go.”

West Virginians are eager to see the road become a reality, he said. They want it for a connection to South Carolina as well as for enhanced economic development.

In Virginia, activity started and stopped as the DOT struggled to find a route that would be acceptable to regulators and residents. The state tweaked the chosen route a bit last summer and is winding up its planning for about half the length of I-73 in the state, spokeswoman Laura Bullock said.

Virginia intends to file its plans with the Federal Highway Administration later this year. That agency must grant final approval before construction can begin.

Virginia's plan builds its 70-mile southern section of I-73, connecting with North Carolina at U.S. 220. The road connects on the north side with I-81, then travels into West Virginia.

The intersection with I-81 provides a viable route for the indefinite time that planners must wait for money to build the whole road, Bullock said.

"If you can't build it all, the question is what can you do that makes sense," she said. Virginians said the southern path of I-73 is badly needed because that area is suffering from a lagging economy and has no interstate access.

North Carolina has moved ahead on parts of I-73, planning to use the U.S. 220 corridor for most of the path as the road heads toward South Carolina.

North Carolina also is building I-74 that heads east from I-73 near Rockingham.

Two months ago, highway officials from the two states agreed on connection points for the roads. North Carolina will build its I-73 connection south of I-74 near Rockingham, and South Carolina will extend Carolina Bays Parkway north to the state line to meet I-74.

The result will form an interstate loop through the Pee Dee and coastal regions of both states.

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Illustration:One map

