

Land deal clears way for I-73's southern leg

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The S.C. Budget and Control Board has approved the sale of 30 acres formerly owned by the Little Pee Dee River Heritage Preserve that will help make way for building of the proposed Interstate 73.

The terms of the deal, approved Thursday, include a payment of \$750,000 by the S.C. Department of Transportation to the heritage preserve, said Michael Sponhour, spokesman for the Budget and Control Board. The money will be used by the Heritage Preserve to purchase land elsewhere to compensate for the loss of the property. The land relinquished by the Heritage Preserve is adjacent to the S.C. 917 bridge on the Little Pee Dee River at the Marion-Horry County line.

The Little Pee Dee Heritage Preserve is a 9,000-acre tract that is home to trees, lakes, animals and a portion of the Little Pee Dee River.

Officials from the SCDOT and the Heritage Preserve voted in 2007 to take a 10-to-1 swap for the land on the Little Pee that's slated to be used for I-73.

With the deal for the property finalized, I-73 planners can move forward with the process to build the southern portion of I-73. The SCDOT received approval of a federal permit late in 2007 after an Environmental Impact Study was completed on the area in which the southern leg of the interstate would run. The southern leg consists of a 50-mile corridor in an area from Interstate 95 in Dillon County, through Marion County, to S.C. 22, just outside of Aynor in Horry County.

The interstate, if it is built, ultimately will run from Myrtle Beach to Sault Ste. Marie, Mich. It will cross six states — Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia and the Carolinas — and traverse 60 miles in Marlboro, Dillon, Marion and Horry counties. Normal construction time for the interstate would be 10 years, but officials have consistently said that the project could be completed in less-than-normal time. The SCDOT has identified about \$100 million to go toward the \$2 billion that will be needed to build I-73. Tolls have been approved to pay for the construction of the interstate, too.

Mitchell Metts, SCDOT's project manager for I-73, said in an interview with the Morning News in December that the money on hand is being used to buy property that is in the path of the proposed interstate's southern leg.

Metts said finalization on the Environmental Impact Study for the northern corridor of I-73, from North Carolina to I-95 in Dillon County, is expected this spring.

The interstate is No. 5 on the U.S. Department of Transportation's list of priority roads and the top priority in the state.