

## Lawsuit seeks to halt I-73 construction in Virginia

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By Terry Ward  
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A federal lawsuit seeks to halt the building of 70 miles of the proposed Interstate 73 in Virginia.

I-73 is being planned to run from Michigan to Myrtle Beach. If built, it would cross the Michigan state line into Ohio and run southeast through West Virginia, Virginia and eventually into the Carolinas.

A group called Virginians for Appropriate Roads (VAR) said in the lawsuit it filed Tuesday in Richmond, Va., that construction of I-73 from Roanoke, south to the North Carolina line, would result in "significant, irreversible adverse effects on natural scenic, and ecological resources" of the state.

According to a VAR press release, the group also said I-73 isn't needed because exiting highways in Virginia are adequate.

In April, the Federal Highway Administration allowed officials in Virginia to begin the design of I-73, which is estimated to cost \$4 billion for the portion to be built in the state. Brad Dean, executive director of the National I-73/I-74 Corridor Association and executive director of the of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce, said the push for I-73 will continue despite the move by VAR.

"We're disappointed, but not surprised," he said of the lawsuit. "I don't expect (the lawsuit) to stop it, but it could slow down progress."

Dean also said officials in Virginia are some of the most energized in favor of I-73 among those from all the states involved.

"Virginia stands to gain economically because the states on either side of it, West Virginia and North Carolina, are moving forward," he said.

George Lester II of Martinsville, Va., who is the vice chairman of the National I-73/I-74 Corridor Association, said the lawsuit was expected.

"The lawsuit is not a surprise. It was filed by an organization that has been opposed to Interstate I-73 in Virginia for several years," he said.

Lester said the lawsuit will address the process that was followed in the study to plan the interstate.

"The suit was filed in federal court because the action is being taken against the Federal Highway Administration, as well as the Virginia Department of Transportation," he said. "The suit will be determined on the basis of whether the Virginia Department of Transportation followed procedures in the Location, Design/ Study Environmental Impact. The issues (that VAR has) must be with the process VDOT followed, not the decision by the Federal Highway (Administration) to issue the Record of Decision."

Rep. Doug Jennings, D-Bennettsville, is the chairman of the Northeastern Strategic Alliance's I-73 Committee. The construction of I-73 is one of the key initiatives of NESAA, which serves the economic interests of four of the state's counties through which I-73 would travel.

“Officials and the delegation in Virginia are strongly on board with I-73,” Jennings said after hearing of the lawsuit.

Led by a contingent of 38 people from South Carolina, about 60 members of the National I-73/74 Corridor Association urged their House members Sept. 25 to join in a concerted effort to get more than \$11 billion needed to complete I-73’s construction.

Rep. Henry Brown, R-S.C., told the group he is organizing a coalition of 23 House members who represent districts through which the highways would pass in South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Ohio and Michigan.

In Virginia, the FHA has approved the state’s application to build 70 miles of the highway from the North Carolina border to Roanoke. The state estimates it will need \$4 billion to complete the Interstate through the state by 2017.

“The fact is that the road has been declared a ‘priority corridor of national significance’ by the United States Congress,” Lester said.

It could take up to 10 years to build I-73 if funds to build it are secured. More than \$80 million was earmarked for I-73 in the Federal Transportation Act funds two years ago. South Carolina’s portion of I-73 would traverse Marlboro, Dillon, Marion and Horry counties and is expected to cost \$2 billion. So far, \$100 million had been identified for the construction of I-73 in the Palmetto State.

State lawmakers passed legislation in 2006 that will allow for toll collection to help finance I-73 construction once it is built, and the FHA is permitting toll collection on I-73 to help finance its construction.

Officials with the S.C. Department of Transportation announced last month that they are using money its has on hand to buy property for I-73.

An Environmental Impact Study has been completed on the southern leg of I-73 that would run from Interstate 95 in Dillon County to S.C. 22 near Aynor. For final federal approval to be granted for the southern leg of I-73, The Little Pee Dee River Heritage Trust must give the final OK for 30 acres of along the river to be used. SCDOT estimates the cost of the southern leg of the interstate to be \$1.3 billion.

The northern leg of I-73 will run north of Marlboro County to the west side of I-95 in Dillon County. The interstate’s planners are conducting the environmental impact study on the land over which the northern leg is scheduled to run. That part of the project is estimated to cost about \$800 million.

To date, I-73 is No. 5 on the U.S. Department of Transportation’s list of top priority roads. The project also has been put on a fast track by the SCDOT, which named it as the state’s No. 1 transportation priority.

— Gil Klein of Media General’s Washington Bureau contributed to this report.

On the Web:

Interstate 73 Environmental Impact Study, [www.i73insc.com](http://www.i73insc.com)