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Leaders huddle over plans for area's growth

By Lisa Fleisher - The Sun News

Barry DuVal, president and CEO of Kaufman & Canoles Consulting LLC, was the keynote speaker of the Growth Summit 2007. At an economic summit packed with Grand Strand business and government leaders Friday afternoon, an unlikely moment of emotion from one of the elder statesmen reminded the group of the human need for a major interstate leading inland from the coast.

Joe Young, who had just been voted vice chairman of the S.C. DOT commission earlier that morning, choked back tears as he recalled the time when his family hunkered down in their house through Hurricane Hazel in 1954.

"[The house] began to shift," he said. "I prayed harder. And I realized how important the ability to leave was before a hurricane."

The afternoon's Growth Summit held at Coastal Carolina University was filled with statistics and information about government programs and economic tools - a brainstorming session to rally the community around the 105-mile, \$2 billion section of I-73 proposed from North Carolina to Horry County.

Leaders are hoping the highway, which would run through Marlboro, Dillon, Marion and Horry counties, will bring along with it economic development, more tourists to the beach, a faster commute and, maybe most important of all, an evacuation route from the coast.

"Folks, if a Hugo comes in this area or something even less," Young warned, "we won't get the people out of Myrtle Beach and Georgetown County or off the Waccamaw Neck" without the highway.

The road has been in the works since at least 1982 and is projected to temporarily bring \$3.5 billion in total economic output, 43,000 jobs and \$1.3 billion in labor income, according to numbers presented Friday by Don Schunk, a CCU economist.

Officials are looking for new ways to finance the project, including one way announced Friday that would allow private companies to run tolls on the road.

While the area searches for funding sources, including lobbying the federal government, it must also start thinking of ways to encourage development along the I-73 corridor, panelists said.

One program used extensively in North Carolina - but almost not at all in South Carolina - is the New Markets Tax Credits Program. It is a federal program that provides tax incentives to investors to spur growth and jobs in poor areas.

That is the type of public-private partnership the area should be looking at, said Barry DuVal, the former secretary of commerce in Virginia.

DuVal also stressed that it is important for political leaders to not just listen to public opinion, but also to weigh it against the long-term good of the region.

To help officials make those decisions, DuVal said business leaders should show support - write letters, attend meetings.

"If we can just get off the ground, we're ready to go," said state Rep. Jim Battle of Nichols. "We're ready to soar."

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