

Lester, No basis for I-73 suit

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An activist group's lawsuit against Interstate 73 is without merit, according to a local developer who helped spearhead plans for the highway.

"It's a nuisance suit," said George Lester, chairman of JobLink, a group that has pushed for I-73's construction for more than a decade.

Lester noted that the federal government already has endorsed construction of an approximately 70-mile stretch of I-73 through Southwestern Virginia by the record of decision issued by the Federal Highway Administration in April. The decision cleared the way for the route to be designed.

Lester said he is not surprised at the lawsuit because Virginians for Appropriate Roads "has been opposed to I-73 from the beginning."

Basically, the group is trying to delay the process by questioning how the government considered the need for the highway, he said. "I feel very comfortable ... that the state has been thorough in its work," said Lester.

He called the record of decision "the monumental step" toward I-73 being built eventually.

Virginians for Appropriate Roads filed the lawsuit Tuesday in U.S. District Court in Richmond. The suit contends I-73 will cause "significant, irreversible and adverse effects on natural, scenic and ecological resources."

Opponents claim the highway is not needed. They also say that if all of I-73's planned route between South Carolina and Michigan is not built at once, none of it should be constructed, according to published reports.

Because construction is expensive, "that's the way you build highways," Lester said. "You build them in stretches."

State transportation officials have estimated the cost of building I-73 from Roanoke to the North Carolina line at \$4 billion. But only about \$13.3 million in state and federal funds so far have been allocated for construction.

Lester said the state is having problems funding transportation needs.

“Money’s the problem right now,” he said. “It is the only issue we have to worry about.”

However, Rob Cary, I-73 project manager for the Virginia Department of Transportation, has estimated that construction of the Virginia portion of Interstate 73 could take 20-25 years to finish — once it gets started.

Lester indicated that he thinks I-73 eventually will be built through the region because numerous federal and state lawmakers from Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and West Virginia have shown support for it.

I-73’s approved route would run through Henry County east of Martinsville. A map of the route shows potential interchanges with U.S. 220 and Virginia 87 near Ridgeway, Virginia 650 (Irisburg Road) near Axton, U.S. 58 and Virginia 57 near Laurel Park and Virginia 108 near Franklin County.

Economic developers say I-73 will help bring business and industry to the area. That is because large trucks that deliver materials and ship products travel easier along interstates, which lack driveway connections that can slow traffic, they have said.