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LET'S FACE I-73 COST

Too many local folks and state leaders think Interstate 73 will be built between Myrtle Beach and the N.C. line in Marlboro County now that President Bush has signed the new transportation reauthorization bill. They think that because the federal government in the past has picked up 80 percent to 90 percent of the cost of interstate highway construction, South Carolina needs to come up with only 10 percent or 20 percent of the projected \$2 billion cost of its portion of I-73.

They're kidding themselves. The days when the feds picked up the lion's share of interstate construction costs are gone. The drunken-sailor spending of the Republican Congress and Bush administration has seen to that. The 18.4 cents-per-gallon federal gasoline tax barely raises enough revenue for existing federal highway obligations to the states, let alone new highways. Moreover, Congress has effectively usurped the federal highway trust fund to make annual deficits seem smaller. The \$286.4 billion the transportation bill allocates to the states will be borrowed - tallied against the national debt.

Because Congress designated I-73 a "project of national and regional significance," the project could attract funding in addition to the \$81 million the bill allocates to the highway's S.C. portion. Even if that happens, though, the S.C. Department of Transportation still will have to come up with a majority of funding, whether through tolls, raising the S.C. gasoline tax or another revenue stream.

We do mean "additional." The 16 cents-per-gallon S.C. gasoline tax raises too little money to cover the cost of state-highway maintenance as it is. Indeed, the S.C. DOT has made a good case for raising the state tax enough to improve maintenance caliber statewide; covering the cost of new roads is not part of that vision.

Most readers understand that I-73 will be an economic lifeline for Horry County and its neighbors in the Pee Dee. Because it will enhance economic development in every community along its route, the pain of paying for it will be rewarded many times over. Better to acknowledge that we must endure this pain than continue to pretend the feds have this problem handled.

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