

## Lobbyists seek support for I-73/74

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By Gil Klein

WASHINGTON - Saying they came to "curry favor with Congress," business and political leaders from six states seeking federal support to build Interstates 73 and 74 fanned out on Capitol Hill Tuesday to buttonhole House members.

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 to join in a concerted effort to get more than \$11 billion dollars needed to complete highway construction.

"This project is huge for us," said Alan Clemmons, a South Carolina state representative who chairs the association. "We're looking for a great deal of money. We want the corridor-state congressmen to link arms to help each other."

The next federal highway bill that would authorize the money is at least two years away. But Clemmons said if the association doesn't start organizing now, it will not have the clout to make this project a national priority.

"We're early, but we intend to be early," Clemmons said. "We'd rather be early than late."

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.

"Nothing happens unless someone up here makes it happen," Brown said. "It's strength in numbers."

Key to the effort will be Rep. James Clyburn, D-S.C., who is House majority whip, a top House Democratic leader. The South Carolina contingent, which flew in a chartered plane from Myrtle Beach Tuesday morning, crowded into his conference room in the Capitol.

Clyburn said he's ready to use his new congressional influence to push the highway project.

"We're committed to this," he told reporters after the meeting. "The position I'm in allows me to be even more helpful."

Construction of major new interstate highways has slowed in recent years as sources for funding have not kept up with the needs of maintaining the huge national system, much less building major new additions.

The I-73/74 routes are one of five major interstate highways still on the books for construction.

Advocates see the new highways as essential for economic development, especially in the high-poverty areas of eastern South Carolina and North Carolina. They bill the highways as a way to alleviate traffic congestion heading toward beachfront tourist attractions and as an escape route for hurricanes.

Clyburn envisions a major new commercial and industrial area where I-73 crosses I-95 in Marion County, South Carolina.

"We're looking for a site for a mega industrial park," Clyburn said. "This opens up a tremendous new vista for commercial and economic development."

I-73 would start at Myrtle Beach and I-74 near Wilmington, N.C. They would join in North Carolina and head north. I-74 would branch off to the Winston-Salem area while I-73 would continue north through southwestern Virginia, West Virginia, Ohio and Michigan, ending at the Canadian border.

"I place this as a high priority for the entire state," said Rep. Howard Coble, R-N.C., who said he would sign onto the coalition.

"This will enhance our economic ties to South Carolina, North Carolina, West Virginia and Ohio," said Rep. Virgil Goode, R-Va. "The only way to get a sizable chunk of money is to have a coalition."

Work on the highways is farther along in the South than in the North.

In South Carolina, environmental studies are underway on the proposed route. The state is using \$100 million in federal money received this year to begin to buy right of way. The state is looking for \$2 billion from the federal government to complete the work but is still expected to make the highway a toll road.

Already 44 miles in North Carolina have been completed. Sections are expected to be finished this year near Greensboro and in Montgomery and Richmond counties and by 2008 in Robeson County. Another \$2.2 billion is needed to complete work in North Carolina.

In Virginia, the Federal Highway Administration 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.

Today the Corridor Association meets with senators from the six states as well as with Department of Transportation officials.