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MILESTONE FOR I-73

The quest to move Interstate 73 from concept to reality passed a major milestone Thursday - and we're not just talking the further narrowing of route possibilities. Thanks to the good offices of the interest group that speaks for all of northeast South Carolina, the North Eastern Strategic Alliance, S.C. legislators have declared their willingness to finance construction of the road with tolls. Identical House and Senate bills were announced at an NESAs gathering Thursday in Columbia.

The likelihood that I-73 will be a toll road won't come as good news to some readers. In South Carolina and in many of the states from which new residents emigrate, the populist tradition that highways should be "free" to users is well entrenched.

But as S.C. Sen. Hugh Leatherman, R-Florence, noted Thursday, the state must have a steady source of revenue to finance the construction of I-73, which would run from the N.C.-S.C. line in Marlboro County through the Pee Dee to Myrtle Beach.

Congress, which last year allocated more than \$80 million to the project, will not keep the money coming unless the state provides matching funds from some source. The S.C. portion of the Myrtle Beach-to-Michigan highway will cost at least \$2 billion. It makes more sense to finance the state share with tolls than to wait until the S.C. Department of Transportation finds I-73 money in its own budget - unlikely to happen because every cent of its money is committed to other projects.

The need now is for the General Assembly to fast-track the tolling bills to passage. Once that's accomplished, the state can show the feds that it has set aside a significant, continuing stream of money for the project and construction work can begin. The dream that local folks and visitors could be driving on I-73 within 10 years would come true.

The S.C. Department of Transportation, meanwhile, properly has factored public input into its thinking on what route I-73 should follow to the Grand Strand. At an NESAs meeting Thursday in Columbia, the department announced two "final" route choices that would leave Cool Spring unaffected while ensuring that the final route would pass close enough to Marion, Aynor and other Pee Dee communities to boost their economies. High-speed limited-access highways are economic lifelines for every community they serve.

Both DOT route options would feed I-73 onto S.C. 22 - Veterans Highway - near Aynor and thence over S.C. 31 into Myrtle Beach at Kings Highway. Using the highway, already completed and - except for the width of the shoulders - built to interstate specifications, would dramatically reduce the overall cost of the project. S.C. 31 would

become part of Interstate 74, which would loop down from North Carolina through Brunswick County to the state line near Little River.

We recently expressed concern that N.C. leaders' action toward making I-74 a toll road through Brunswick County could bring that interstate to the Grand Strand ahead of I-73. The introduction of the I-73 tolling bills takes care of that concern, boosting the chance that highway will be completed first.

Regardless of which interstate gets here first, Horry County and the Grand Strand soon will go from rags to riches on high-speed vehicular access. It's the last major metro area in America to get interstate service. It seems fitting that in addressing this unmet need, the feds and both state governments would "overcompensate."

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