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N.C. SENDS TOP ROAD OFFICIALS TO I-73 SUMMIT

Zane Wilson The Sun News

COLUMBIA North Carolina has signaled it takes Friday's Interstate 73 summit with South Carolina seriously by sending a contingent with the clout to influence decisions.

“This could end up being the most important meeting we've had so far on I-73,” said S.C. Rep. Doug Jennings, D Bennettsville, chairman of the I-73 committee of the North Eastern Strategic Alliance. His remarks came Wednesday at a meeting of the legislative I-73 Caucus to prepare for the Friday event.

At first, North Carolina was lukewarm to the meeting but now is sending top-ranking highway board members in addition to the secretary of transportation.

“I'm excited to tell you that I think we're going to have the appropriate heads in the room to make some decisions,” Jennings said.

N.C. Transportation Secretary Lyndo Tippet and four of his board members, including Chairman Doug Galyon of Greensboro, are coming to the summit. Their counterparts, S.C. Department of Transportation Director Betty Mabry and four highway commissioners, also are attending.

“I'm excited that we have all the players coming together with the power to make decisions,” said S.C. Rep. Alan Clemmons, R-Myrtle Beach, chairman of the S.C. I-73 Association.

The summit, to be held at Kingston Plantation in Myrtle Beach, was called by South Carolina to try to reach accord with North Carolina on where the road will connect at the border, and when the Tarheel State plans to build its connection.

“Our challenge is to get North Carolina to live up to Congress' intent” when I-73 was designated in 1991, Jennings said.

Clemmons called an accord on the road connection “the hard part of making I-73 a reality.”

Even though the North Carolinians are coming in force, they also intend to talk about their desire to have Interstate 20 extended northeastward from Interstate 95 to

Wilmington, N.C., and to make Interstate 74 loop into South Carolina near the coast and connect with the Carolina Bays Parkway.

Palmetto State officials say they do not want to talk about other issues.

One of the N.C. Transportation Board members who will attend is G.R. Kindley of Rockingham, who has been chairman of the N.C. I-73/74 Association since its beginning.

That gives Kindley familiarity with the project that could help move the process, Jennings said.

Kindley also has a second home in North Myrtle Beach, so he is familiar with the area's needs, he said.

Kindley said the N.C. contingent will probably not make any firm decisions Friday.

“We're not coming prepared to make commitments,” he said Wednesday. “I don't think either side is far enough along to make commitments.”

Kindley agreed that I-73 could benefit both states and that “at some point in time, it is going to be built.” But there are too many loose ends yet to decide on the connection point, he said.

Still, he hopes the summit will produce enough accord for some movement.

“I hope everybody leaves with a better insight of what needs to be done and what can be done,” Kindley said.

Another participant in the summit is South Carolina's senior member of Congress, U.S. Rep. John Spratt, D-York. The path of the road crosses his district, and Spratt is the only member left from the federal delegation who has been involved in the project since the beginning.

He also was involved in earlier negotiations with North Carolina over the path of the road and will be invaluable in working for a final settlement, Jennings said.

Spratt “will add a new and different dimension” to the talks, Clemmons said.

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