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## INTERSTATE 73

Plan for north leg of I-73 revealed  
Relieved officials prepare to buckle down, raise funds

By Tonya Root - The Sun News

BENNETTSVILLE --When the final preferred route for Interstate 73's northern leg was announced Thursday, officials applauded the decision and then began discussions among themselves on how to pay for the state's newest proposed 96 miles of interstate highway.

"The next big question is funding," said Mitchell Metts, I-73 project manager for the S.C. Department of Transportation. "How to pay for it, that's the big unknown right now."

State officials have obtained \$100 million for the northern and southern legs of the road, but \$2 billion is needed to completely construct it, Metts said. Officials will hold two public hearings, gather feedback on the northern route's path and may adjust the path to avoid problems.

"Now you have the second leg in place and you can finally move forward. Now we're moving to the funding phase," state Rep. Tracy Edge, R-North Myrtle Beach, said after the announcement. "We couldn't worry about funding until we got the route. Now we do have a solid dollar amount we have to work toward, and we will begin that."

I-73, which once complete will run from Horry County to Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., will be the first interstate connection to the Grand Strand, which receives at least 90 percent of its visitors by car, tourism leaders said. Such a thoroughfare could introduce the area to thousands of tourists who otherwise might not visit or it could provide an easier route for regular visitors, officials said.

"We now have a preferred alternative route for the entire route. We know where the road will go, now the decision is how to pay for it," said Brad Dean, president and CEO of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce. "We now need to start paying for this road and building it in increments. It's good news not just for Marlboro County, but for the entire state and region."

Officials unveiled the location of the preferred route for the northern leg during a DOT Commission meeting at the Marlboro Civic Center. The crowd of legislators, local officials and residents exceeded the center's 325-person capacity Thursday and residents were turned away.

The preferred route, dubbed the central route, was chosen out of a 600-square-mile area from three proposed routes, and had the least effect on farmland, wetland, residential homes and communities out of all alternatives, officials said.

The lines on the map are a half-mile-wide corridor, but the interstate's actual footprint will be about 400 feet wide and include six interchanges from the beginning at I-74 in Hamlet, N.C., until it meets the southern leg at I-95 near Latta, Metts said.

"We did receive a lot of feedback on the western route. We really rolled up our sleeves and tried ... but at the end of the day it was too costly to swing that way," Metts said of the proposed western route that went near Chesterfield.

Patrick Tyndall, I-73 project coordinator for the Federal Highway Administration office in Columbia, said the project is moving at swift speed and officials are on track to gain all their permits in three years, a process that typically takes six.

"With good communication it's hard for a project like this to fail. With poor communication it's hard for a project like this to succeed," Tyndall said. He commended the communication and relationship among the 25 state and federal agencies working on the project.

After the announcement, a state and federal DOT official signed a document called the Draft Environmental Impact Statement that contains the preferred path as well as all the reasoning for its selection. That document is required by federal law for such a project.

The northern preferred route begins at I-74 and continues to S.C. 79; to U.S. 15 near Bennettsville and then to S.C. 381 near Clio before continuing to S.C. 34 in Dillon and linking to the southern route at I-95.

The southern preferred route of the interstate was announced in May 2006 and goes from I-95 near Latta to S.C. 22 near Aynor.

The southern route continues to hinge on a crossing of the Little Pee Dee Heritage Preserve near S.C. 917 because federal law provides special protection to conservation land. The state DOT is ready to apply for construction permits for a 30-mile section between Interstate 95 and S.C. 22, but can't do so until the preserve crossing issue is worked out.

"That project is moving well," Metts said of the southern route. "We have one outstanding issue, and we hope to resolve that this fall."

The crossing would take about 27 acres and construction of a new S.C. 917 bridge would take another 3 acres. Once the crossing issue is determined officials can begin right-of-way purchases.

"The most important part of I-73 is getting the route," Sen. Dick Elliott said. "We're going to make a reality out of it now."

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If you go

Public hearings regarding the northern preferred route of I-73:

5 to 8 p.m. Aug. 14 at Marlboro County High School in Bennettsville

4:30 to 8:30 p.m. Aug. 28 at Cole Auditorium at Richmond Community College in Hamlet, N.C.

#### Information

For more information about I-73, the preferred routes or to read the Draft Environmental Impact Statements for the northern and southern legs go to [www.i73insc.com](http://www.i73insc.com) or call 866-I73-inSC.

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