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PANEL TO PUT PRICE ON I-73 IMPACT
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The state Heritage Trust Advisory Board signaled Wednesday that it will not fight an Interstate 73 path through a preserve but will try to extract as much compensation for the loss as possible.

Members agreed to have the staff tally figures on damages including the need for more expensive land management practices required because of the interstate's presence. The Heritage Trust panel must make a recommendation to the state Department of Natural Resources board on what the state Department of Transportation must do to make up for damaging Little Pee Dee Heritage Trust Preserve.

The preserve forms part of the Horry-Marion County line.

The DNR's official position is that it prefers I-73, the first interstate to connect to Horry County, to traverse existing road corridors such as U.S. 501 or S.C. 9 rather than damage the preserve.

The DOT proposes to make up for the loss of 30 acres of the preserve by buying a significant new tract for the Heritage Trust program.

DNR staff member Ed Duncan said DOT's analysis is correct that the preferred path has less wetland and other ecological damage than a corridor along S.C. 9 and U.S. 501.

Even so, DNR decided to withhold support for the preferred path because of the damage to Little Pee Dee River Heritage Preserve, he said.

Staff member Bob Perry said I-73 would take 27.2 acres for its right of way and affect 3.9 acres upstream from the bridge and 2.5 downstream.

But there are other effect besides the loss of those acres, Perry said.

"We have some very unique bear corridors," he said. More bears are being killed on the roads every year, especially in Horry County, and with the addition of an interstate highway, "we envision that there could be significantly greater bear mortality."

That means compensation from the DOT should include special provisions for bears, possibly by preserving some bear habitat, Perry said.

Another issue is management of the high ground, Perry said. The land is burned off every few years to remove underbrush, similar to natural wildfires that would be set by lightning.

Restrictions on burning the land would be much tighter around an interstate highway, said preserve manager Jamie Dozier. Alternatives, such as chemical and mechanical control, cost more.

If that is the case, the extra costs need to be figured into what the DOT should pay, said Mike McShain, chairman of the DNR board.

The staff is to have the figures ready for the Heritage Trust board's February meeting. Members said there is no guarantee they will vote on anything at that time.

The board meets quarterly, and if it does not make a decision in February that could delay the DOT's plans to finish its permit applications by early spring.

Heritage Trust board members said they would not be rushed to a decision and that DOT might have to wait for them.

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