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PRESERVE CROSSING: DNR deal for I-73 delayed
Pending permit won't be affected

By Zane Wilson - The Sun News

Final approval of a \$750,000 payment for damage to a state preserve caused by the planned Interstate 73 was put off this week for another month, but that won't affect the timetable for a construction permit.

The state Budget and Control Board was expected to receive the arrangement today between the state Department of Natural Resources, which manages the preserve, and the state Department of Transportation.

The budget board did not receive the paperwork for action, said spokesman Mike Sponhour. The next board meeting is Dec. 11.

The DNR did not return phone calls Monday seeking an explanation, but DOT's I-73 project leader said he was told the delay was in getting an appraisal of the land that is required by state law.

"I think everything's fine," other than that, said Mitchell Metts, DOT's I-73 project manager.

"It's not holding us up at this point," Metts said.

That's because the DOT has already filed the application for a Federal Highway Administration construction permit between I-95 and S.C. 22, about 30 miles. The bridge crossing at the Little Pee Dee River Heritage Trust Preserve was the only required piece of the puzzle needed for the application.

The DOT filed for the permit based on the agreement, and Metts said he believes the federal agency is accepting that without final state approval.

"We should have an approved document, I hope shortly," he said.

The application is known as a final environmental impact statement. When the federal highway agency approves it, the agency will issue a 30-day public notice of what is called a record of decision stating its intent to approve the permit.

The plan is to cross Little Pee Dee River next to the existing S.C. 917 bridge. The DNR agreed the location is the least damaging to the river system.

But the crossing will damage 30 acres of the preserve. The preserve has special protection under federal highway law, so the I-73 permit could not be granted without an agreement on the river crossing.

The DOT will pay the money to the DNR from some of the money set aside for I-73. The DNR intends to buy similar habitat in the region to replace the damaged land.

What's next

Budget and Control Board could consider approval of the payment at its Dec. 11 meeting. Federal Highway Administration could act on the I-73 route approval in the next few weeks, based on the agreement for the Little Pee Dee River crossing.