

## Ryberg blasts closed huddle

By Kirsten Singleton | Morris News Service  
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COLUMBIA - State Sen. Greg Ryberg, R-Aiken, criticized colleagues Thursday for meeting privately with state Department of Transportation commissioners to discuss prioritizing Interstate 73 near Myrtle Beach over other road projects.

Associated Press

Sen. Greg Ryberg, R-Aiken, said the meeting should have been public.

Click photo for options "I'll lay in the road before putting another dime, another dime in that pool over there if we don't have some accountability and some reform," Mr. Ryberg said.

The Senate is debating how best to reform the state DOT, which has been under scrutiny since a Legislative Audit Council report last fall alleged mismanagement and waste. A Supreme Court ruling this winter also led to the ouster of two sitting commissioners.

The House is considering reforming the DOT and attached its plan to the budget that lawmakers approved Thursday. Mr. Ryberg and others were irritated by a meeting earlier in the day, that included Senate Finance Chairman Hugh Leatherman, DOT commissioners and business leaders.

Critics said the gathering should have been made public because a majority of the DOT commissioners were present. They also said the group shouldn't be prioritizing projects without further study.

"I think when you hold meetings and exclude, or you take votes and exclude members of this body, I think it lacks senatorial courtesy," Mr. Ryberg said.

Gov. Mark Sanford released a statement regarding the meeting.

"We've heard reports of a Commission meeting that may have been held without sufficient public notice, and some very serious questions have been raised about the appointment of a new 1st District Commissioner," Mr. Sanford said. "These kinds of actions further highlight the dysfunction and politicization of this agency that has led to millions of dollars wasted at the DOT and roads across South Carolina in dire need of repair," he said.

Speaking to reporters later, Mr. Leatherman defended the gathering, describing it as a scheduled meeting called by the North Eastern Strategic Alliance, dubbed an "economic development organization" that serves nine counties in northeast South Carolina. Commissioners simply were invited and showed up, he said.

The alliance wanted a resolution prioritizing I-73 to give to the South Carolina congressional delegation next week as a way of showing state support for the project, Mr. Leatherman said.

The DOT Commission met Thursday afternoon and approved the resolution, over the objection of Chairman Tee Hooper.

The commission also added another member, Joe Young, on Thursday. He fills the position vacated by Robert Harrell and represents the area that includes Charleston and Myrtle Beach.

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