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## S.C. AGENCY STEERS ROAD FUNDS TO BOONDOGGLES

Dana Beach

The Legislative Audit Council's review of the S.C. Department of Transportation found that the agency has wasted hundreds of millions of dollars because of poor spending practices. The report documents that the DOT did not negotiate for the lowest contract prices, paid excessively high contract-management fees, paid for work that was never done and otherwise squandered tax dollars.

These are serious and troubling problems.

What the audit did not carefully examine, however, is whether the DOT is building projects that address the real transportation needs of the state, or whether taxpayer dollars are being diverted to politically motivated boondoggles. There is abundant evidence that the agency has condoned spending billions of dollars on projects that provide little or no public benefit.

The most glaring example of this is the S.C. DOT's designation of the construction of Interstate 73, a proposed new highway from Detroit to Myrtle Beach, as the state's top transportation priority.

Originally the brainchild of Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., I-73 would enter South Carolina near Wallace, pass Bennettsville, Blenheim and Clio and extend from Interstate 95 south to Myrtle Beach. As it approaches Myrtle Beach, it will pass Mullins and then connect with S.C. 22, also known as the Conway Bypass.

A few facts are relevant here.

The roads in this area are among the most lightly traveled in the state. Even approaching Myrtle Beach, the Conway Bypass has little traffic on it.

The DOT's own analysis suggests that I-73 will reduce travel time between I-95 and Myrtle Beach by only five to 10 minutes, bringing virtually no economic development to the distressed counties en route.

I-73 is projected to cost more than \$2 billion.

To make things more absurd, North Carolina is also in the process of designing and funding another interstate, Interstate 74, from I-95 to the coast. It will run parallel to I-73 and will, at points, be less than 30 miles north of I-73. The product of an absurdly antiquated "planning" process, our DOT leaders are promoting two new multibillion-

dollar interstates running side by side through some of the least populated, least congested parts of each of our states.

Moving inland, the S.C. DOT is proceeding with the proposed Briggs-Delaine-Pearson Connector, nine miles of new road including a three-mile bridge across Sparkleberry Swamp. This road will connect Loan Star with Rimini. Its projected cost is \$150 million.

Meanwhile, almost every weekday morning, traffic comes to a standstill on Interstate 26 approaching Charleston. Almost every weekday afternoon traffic again stops as commuters leave Charleston. According to the Charleston Council of Governments, the entire system will reach gridlock in little more than a decade.

I-26 is the most heavily traveled road on the coast. It is the central artery for freight, commerce, tourism and commuting in the Charleston metro region; a vital link critical to the state's economy. Yet the S.C. DOT has allocated no significant funding to alleviate congestion along this critical corridor. There are analogies to I-26 in every urban and growing part of the state - transportation corridors that are heavily congested and getting worse every year that have been passed over for funding.

Under no logical, objective assessment of state transportation needs would I-73 or the Briggs-Delaine-Pearson Connector rank at the top of the state's transportation priority list.

Significantly, these politically driven boondoggles are not exceptions to an otherwise well-crafted set of funding priorities. They reflect a system of project selection that is fundamentally flawed.

Dozens of other proposed projects, costing billions more dollars, are similarly wasteful. The \$500 million plan to build two new bridges to rural Johns Island and the proposal to extend a sprawl-inducing bridge across the Waccamaw River, connecting Myrtle Beach to Bucksville and tens of thousands of acres of developer-owned rural land west of the river, are two more egregious examples.

The stark reality is that the S.C. DOT has no system for objectively analyzing whether a transportation project is beneficial or not. The process by which I-73, Briggs-Delaine-Pearson, the Johns Island bridges, the bridge across the Waccamaw and other projects like them are included in the state's funding agenda is political horse-trading, pure and simple.

Fortunately, many of our political representatives, from Gov. Mark Sanford to House Speaker Robert Harrell, have called the agency's hand and are demanding reforms and accountability. At an absolute minimum, the legislature should establish objective criteria to evaluate and rank proposed transportation projects.

The governing structure of the agency should be completely overhauled as well. The ultimate goal of transportation reform should be to direct taxpayer dollars to projects that serve public needs rather than special interests.

The writer, of Charleston, heads the S.C. Coastal Conservation League.

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