

## SCDOT to unveil interstate route

Saturday, Jul 14, 2007 - 11:04 PM Updated: 01:08 PM

This map shows Interstate 73 routes around Latta. An announcement on the preferred northern route for the interstate is set to be announced this week. Photo By: Matt

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WBTW- News 13

This week, the S.C. Department of Transportation Commission will take another step in the process to turn the long-awaited proposed Interstate 73 — from Myrtle Beach to Sault Ste. Marie, Mich. — into reality.

The recommended Preferred Alternative for the Northern Project of I-73 will be unveiled at 1:30 p.m. Thursday at Marlboro Civic Center, 106 Clyde St., Bennettsville.

The Northern Project of I-73 will run from Interstate 95, through western Dillon County, Marlboro County and Richmond County, N.C., to meet Interstate 74 in the Hamlet, N.C., area.

The northern portion of I-73 will be about 30 miles long. The SCDOT is coordinating that portion with highway officials in North Carolina.

The SCDOT's recommended Preferred Alternative for the Southern Project of I-73 runs from I-95, at a point west of Latta in Dillon County, to S.C. Route 22 (Veterans Highway) in Horry County. Details of that route were made public in May 2006.

The interstate, if completed, will cost close to \$2 billion for the South Carolina portion.

In all, it will cross six states — Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia and the Carolinas — and traverse 60 miles in four Pee Dee counties.

The interstate is likely to take at least 10 years to complete, provided the money to construct it is obtained.

As a part of the last Federal Transportation Act, passed in 2005, \$81 million was earmarked for the funding of I-73 within South Carolina. The money is being spent on environmental studies and right-of-way purchases. The state also got another \$3 million in federal funds for I-73 in 2005.

To date, I-73 is No. 5 on the U.S. Department of Transportation's list of priority roads. The project has been put on a fast track by the SCDOT, which named it as the state's No. 1 transportation priority.

The Environmental Impact Study for I-73, which typically takes about five years, is expected to be completed in three years.

The southern portion of the route still has to be approved via federal permit, which should come as soon as an agreement to cross a heritage preserve, involving 27 acres at the Little Pee Dee River, can be reached.

Planners are actively soliciting ideas on how to raise funds for I-73.

Legislators, including Rep. Doug Jennings, D-Bennettsville, chairman of the North Eastern Strategic Alliance's I-73 Committee, hailed U.S. Secretary of Transportation Mary Peter's June visit to Myrtle Beach as a pivotal point toward bringing the construction of I-73 to fruition.

Jennings also said Peters, who spoke in strong support of I-73, told I-73 officials when she was in the state that a plan to expand the Panama Canal will increase volume at East Coast ports and substantially increase up the need for another interstate in the region.

In addition to federal attention being placed on I-73, state lawmakers passed legislation in 2006 that will allow for toll collection to help finance I-73 construction, once it is built.