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S.C. SENATORS OFFER TO NIX I-73 FUNDS

Zane Wilson The Sun News

Three months after announcing their victory in helping obtain \$81 million for Interstate 73, South Carolina's two senators are sponsoring a bill to take away the money for Hurricane Katrina relief.

The measure is expected to be offered in the ongoing Senate debate on cutting the federal budget to pay to rebuild what hurricanes Katrina and Wilma destroyed on the Gulf Coast, said U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-Seneca.

Graham and U.S. Sen. Jim DeMint, R-Greenville, are among seven who are supporting the measure to strip all the earmarked projects from the massive six-year highway funding bill that passed in late July. The measure also proposes a two-year delay for the Medicare prescription-drug plan.

Other local funds at risk are the \$4 million allocation for a southern connector to U.S. 701 and \$2.4 million to finish the Carolina Bays Parkway.

DeMint said no one thinks the bill will pass because all the states would lose their earmarks and no one wants to give them up.

"That money is going to come," he said. "Our intent was to just rattle some cages."

Graham said he thinks I-73 should be funded, but the way project money is allocated is wrong and the debate on finding money for Katrina recovery is a good place to start the discussion.

"It is a start of a debate that will enhance I-73 down the road," Graham said.

The senators who wanted a change had to show they were willing to cut projects dear to their own states before anyone would pay attention, DeMint said.

Graham said I-73, which would be the first link to an interstate highway for the nation's largest tourism destination without one, is still his top priority for funding. Wiping out the congressional practice of earmarking certain projects is a higher goal, he said.

"What we're trying to do is stop a practice that is ruining the country," Graham said.

He cited the \$250 million allocation for a bridge in Alaska that would serve a community of 50 people. Citizens who talk to him are outraged about that, so "here's what I'm going to do about it," he said.

Graham does not expect the proposal to pass.

"It's going to fail, probably miserably, but it's a first step," he said.

The point is to persuade Congress to give the state transportation departments the road money and let them decide how to prioritize projects based on what residents want, rather than what Congress wants, Graham said.

"I'm willing to give this up and let people in South Carolina who are in charge of building the road system do the job instead of me doing the job," Graham said.

If that happened, projects such as I-73 could get more money because unworthy projects would not be soaking up the funds, he said.

Brad Dean, president of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce, said he understands what the senators are trying to do but thinks it's risky.

"As long as federal spending is being handed out like a buffet, we need to be at the head table and be carrying a large plate," Dean said.

The chamber has been one of the key leaders in lobbying for funding for the road, which was designated by Congress in 1991 to connect South Carolina and Michigan.

Dean said the system of earmarking funds for projects in Congress is flawed, but "we would rather see them attack the process, not the projects."

He said that although there is a need to find ways to fund the Katrina recovery, "I-73 and the southern connector will save lives and prevent what happened in New Orleans."

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