

Sun News, The (Myrtle Beach, SC)  
February 7, 2006  
Section: FRONT  
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## SANFORD IN MB TO SIGN I-73 BILL Zane Wilson The Sun News

Interstate 73 and its relationship to tourism and the state's economy brought the governor and another top state official to Myrtle Beach on Monday.

Gov. Mark Sanford came for a morning ceremony at the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce to sign the bill allowing I-73 to be a toll road if necessary. At noon, House Speaker Bobby Harrell, R-Charleston, met with chamber members and the S.C. I-73 Association.

"It will only expedite tourism here on the Grand Strand," said Sanford, who has been interested in the highway since his days in Congress.

He said 13 million people visit the area each year, and 80 percent of them drive. I-73 will provide people a better way to get to the beaches and is "vitally important" for hurricane evacuation, he said.

The highway is coming closer to reality because political and business leaders "pulled together and made it happen," Sanford said.

"This is a critical step in the future of I-73," said Brad Dean, president of the chamber.

The law does not require a toll, though highway officials have said they probably need it to help pay to build the road. The amount of money and location of toll booths will be up to the state Department of Transportation.

At the lunch meeting, Harrell reminded the 120 people who attended that he is a homey of sorts. He owns a condo in Surfside Beach, and his wife, Cathy Smith Harrell, is from Horry County and is a Socastee High School graduate.

"I absolutely love this place," he said.

Harrell told chamber members he sees South Carolina's economy evolving to become more information-based. Still, he said, "tourism has always been the backbone of the economy, and we've got to protect it."

I-73 must be built because "it's going to choke the state financially" if people cannot get in and out more easily than they do now, Harrell said.

The economy is the issue for the coming years, and his plan includes giving the state Commerce Department more money to assist existing businesses, and looking for ways to get more money into road-building and road maintenance.

With gas prices rising, it is not politically possible to raise the gas tax, Harrell said.

What might be possible is to funnel other revenue, such as the sales tax on cars, to road funds, he said.

He also predicted the House will pass some kind of property-tax-relief bill for homeowners this week.

"I know it makes business folks nervous," but Harrell said he is trying to steer the debate to a measure "that doesn't do harm or does as little harm as possible to somebody else."

The House wants to impose 2 percent more sales tax and use the 7-cent tax to pay most of the property tax bills on owner-occupied homes. Business organizations are opposing the bill on grounds it could force up taxes on them.

Mickey McCamish, president of Myrtle Beach Golf Holiday, asked why the \$1.2 billion in sales tax exemptions are not being dealt with.

Harrell said it is politically impossible to take on the tax exemptions one by one.

Instead, he is pushing for a bill that would have a 15-member task force study the exemptions currently in place and recommend which should be deleted.

Their recommendation would have to be voted on as one piece, not by individual exemption, Harrell said.

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