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SENATE GIVES I-73 BILL GREEN LIGHT Zane Wilson The Sun News

COLUMBIA A bill making Interstate 73 a toll road passed Thursday after a senator who wanted to add a toll on Interstate 95 backed off.

It now heads to Gov. Mark Sanford, who has said he will sign the measure. The bill allows the state Department of Transportation to put a toll on Horry County's first interstate highway connection. No toll amount was set and it isn't required, but the agency said it likely would be necessary.

Legislators hope to use the bill as a message to Congress that the state is serious about the road and about paying its share to build it.

I-73 is planned to link Sault Ste. Marie, Mich. at the Canadian border with Myrtle Beach. Its companion, Interstate 74, will link to Myrtle Beach from Brunswick County, N.C.

"I think it's urgent to show support for what our congressional delegation has done," said Sen. Hugh Leatherman, R-Florence.

The state's congressional delegation got \$81 million for the 90 miles of I-73 in South Carolina in the federal highway bill, but told backers they want to see a toll on the road so their colleagues will be friendlier to awarding more money to the highway.

Sanford's spokesman said the governor agrees with the bill and will sign it into law as soon as he receives it.

"We're absolutely in favor of tolls on I-73 if that's what it takes to get the road built as quickly as possible," Joel Sawyer said. "I-73 is incredibly important to the future of the Grand Strand."

Sanford had a hand in shaping the route of I-73 when he was in Congress. It was originally intended to run to Charleston, but after it met with resistance in Georgetown and Charleston counties he got an amendment passed ending it near Conway.

The toll bill raced through the House in three days, but wrecked in the Senate after Sen. Brad Hutto, D-Orangeburg, and Sen. John Matthews, D-Bowman, tried to amend it to include a toll booth on I-95 near Orangeburg.

Sen. Larry Grooms, R-Bonneau, who opposes a toll on I-95, then blocked the bill and Hutto also blocked it until his amendment received consideration.

Grooms said Thursday he gathered enough votes to defeat Hutto's amendment. Hutto agreed to withdraw his amendment but said he plans to submit a separate bill for an I-95 toll.

Grooms said it was important to get the I-73 bill passed.

“You have folks sitting in Washington right now looking at what the General Assembly does on this toll,” he said.

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