

South takes the lead: I-73 will push from South to North

Despite landowner concerns, interstate moving forward; Development, tourism reasons for building the new road

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This story ran in the Marion Star & Mullins Enterprise on Wednesday, Aug. 22.

If the sole purpose of Interstate 73 is to deliver visitors from the North to Myrtle Beach, says Brad Dean, executive director of the National I-73 Association now headquartered at Myrtle Beach, it wouldn't be happening.

In fact, "the greatest benefit won't be at Myrtle Beach, but inland," says Dean.

He expects that, by linking with existing interstates, I-73 will draw industry into some of the most economically depressed counties in South Carolina.

Jeff McKay, executive director of the Northeastern Strategic Alliance, offers a similar assessment.

"The fact that I-73 will connect us up with other corridors (I-95, I-40, I-85 and I-81) will be of tremendous benefit, to form a logistical network for us, along with what we have," he says.

However, McKay notes, the project, termed a "Corridor of Strategic Significance," isn't just about commerce. Safety is a major concern, he says; I-73 will provide an additional route for hurricane evacuation.

Dean acknowledges that momentum was lost over the years, since 1991 when Congress first proposed construction of the interstate from the Canadian border to the Atlantic coast, but recent developments have him feeling optimistic.

"We're going to get that interstate and it's going to come through Marion County," he says.

The biggest factor in the resurgence of momentum, both say, is that construction is to begin, rather than end, here. The original plan called for construction to start in the North and proceed South.

Progress stalled when Congress failed to provide federal funding in its Transportation Reauthorization Bill, which comes up for review only once every six years, says Dean.

The northern states, Ohio and Michigan, pulled back to work on other priorities, he said.

"To have the National I-73 Association office in Myrtle Beach is very fortunate," McKay observes. The association headed by Dean is charged with activating and coordinating effort on a national level. "They could have been anywhere," he says.

Dean says he's traveled to Washington, D.C., 15 to 20 times in the past two years on I-73/74 business. He credits South Carolina with making great strides.

"Our current challenge is to energize other states to insure that this is a national project, not a South Carolina project," says Dean.

Status of I-73
in the South

I-73 was at the top of the local news again recently, with the unveiling of the “Preferred Alternative for the Northern Project of I-73” at the July 19 meeting of the S.C. Department of Transportation Commission in Bennettsville, and the public hearing on Aug. 14.

The unveiling was for a 30-mile section of I-73 from Interstate 95 in Dillon County to Interstate 74 in the vicinity of Hamlet, N.C.

Last year, in May 2006, the “Preferred Alternative for the Southern Project of I-73,” was unveiled for the portion of the road from I-95 to S.C. Route 22.

Postings on the “North Carolina Progress Page” at the Web site www.duke.edu illustrate activity underway in the southern states.

Photos show “Interstate 73” and “Future 73” signs already set in place in North Carolina on stretches of highway where the corridor coincides with existing roads. Another site, AARoads.com, details activity in the Virginias, reporting that, since 2000, West Virginia has been upgrading existing U.S. highways to National Corridor standards wherever they overlap with the future I-73/74.

AARoads also reports that I-73 is regarded as ‘high importance’ in Virginia, saying, “In June 1999, the Virginia General Assembly resolved that Interstate 73 is a vital part of the state’s economy.”

Closer to home, a story by (Florence) Morning News writer Terry Ward, about the S.C. Commission’s July 6 meeting, quotes Rep. Doug Jennings, D-Bennettsville, chairman of the Northeast Strategic Alliance’s I-73 committee, as saying, “The I-73 project has been put on a fast track by the S.C. Department of Transportation, which named it as the state’s No. 1 transportation priority. The Environmental Impact Study, which typically takes about five years, is expected to be completed in three years.”

What about up North?

Recent activity appears to validate an observation in the 2005 AARoads’ report that says, “It is also worth mentioning that the first section of Interstate 73 to be built will be the portion from Roanoke south to Myrtle Beach, while the section from Roanoke north to Michigan is either on hold or scheduled for construction well beyond 2020.”

With numerous sources indicating that construction of the northern leg appears remote at best, hearing local officials continue to refer to I-73/74 as “an interstate corridor from Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., to Myrtle Beach, S.C.” can seem misleading.

Mitchell Metts, I-73 project manager for the South Carolina Department of Transportation, explains, “The road continues to be defined by those parameters because the federal law is written that it will run from there to here.”

Interstate 73 in its entirety is part of High Priority Corridor 5: I-73/74 North-South Corridor. Its designation is written into law.

“However,” Metts continues, “the law left it up to each individual state to determine how and when, and each state was expected to fund construction independently.”

The Transportation Reauthorization Bill is a “crucial element to funding highways,” says Dean. When the bill came up for renewal in the early 1990s, Congress failed to commit any funds to building I-73/74, he says. Regarding Michigan, the Web site at www.Interstate-guide.com/i-073.html reports “Between 1999 and 2001, the Michigan

Department of Transportation studied the feasibility of the Interstate 73 Corridor in that state. The study was completed in December 2001, with a decision not to proceed with Interstate 73 due to lack of funding and a lack of need along certain portions of the route ...”

AARoads says, “In spite of the national highway bill, no studies are underway for this corridor. The former Michigan DOT official Web page was taken offline in 2002, and the Interstate 73 project in Michigan is considered dormant at this time ...”

Regarding Ohio, a comprehensive account can be found on the Internet at www.roadfan.com. “Why I-73 Has Not Been Built in Ohio Yet,” by Kevin Cox (Ohio State University) dates from 2000, undergoing slight revision in March 2001. Cox opens with historical background — “Interstate 73 was first proposed as part of The Intermodal Surface Transportation Act of 1991 (ISTEA). ISTEA would have created a ‘National Highway System.’ This would be a United States Congress system of highways of national significance, as compared to the original system of freeways established with section 7 of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944. One of the routes designated in the 1991 bill was a Great Lakes to Mid-Atlantic Corridor ...”

Cox says debate began in earnest in Ohio on March 16, 1995, when the proposed corridor for I-73 around Columbus was publicly announced. He says the strongest opposition came out of Delaware County (District 6), where citizens believed the proposed route would only make their traffic problems worse. Cox says they viewed I-73 as a “top-down project being forced upon the citizenry.”

He says plans in Ohio were to pay for the construction by making I-73 a toll road, thus the Ohio Turnpike Commission, manager of the state’s toll roads, was given authority over the project. But, in January 1996, perceived mismanagement of funds by the OTC led to its bowing out of the I-73 proposal. Cox writes, “Possible construction was to be declared an Ohio Department of Transportation future project. However, ODOT had no funding for construction of the freeway for the appreciable future, so there was no sensible time frame.”

AARoads quotes the Delaware Gazette saying in late March 1998 that “Interstate 73 remains all but a dead issue in Ohio, with no ODOT funding for construction in sight ... ODOT officials said there are numerous other highway projects ahead of Interstate 73 on its funding priority list.”

The District 6 Ohio DOT Communications Office was contacted to learn the current status of I-73. The person who answered the telephone said she worked in the department when I-73 was being debated, but she’d “have to think about who might know where it stands now,” adding, “It’s been so long since the topic came up.”

Project regaining national support?

Dean says the tables began to turn when Congress earmarked \$81 million for construction of I-73/74 in its most recent Transportation Authorization Bill. Reactivation of the national association after 10 years is another significant development, he says. As evidence of rising national support, Metts cites the June 1 visit by President Bush’s Secretary of Transportation Mary Peters, to the new National I-73 Association headquarters in Myrtle Beach.

“A visit by an official at this level is unprecedented,” he said. “Furthermore, representatives from all six states, including Ohio and Michigan, were there,” and “resolved to form a coalition to make I-73 happen.” Metts quotes Peters saying, “It’s not if, it’s when,” and pledging to “do everything we can in Washington to make the road a reality.”

Dean says the fact that four (South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia) of the six states are making meaningful progress is good news.

Another positive sign, he says, is that Ohio and Michigan are expected to send delegates to the National I-73 Association’s “I-73/I-74 Road Rally” in Washington, D.C., in late September.

“The purpose of the rally is to begin emphasizing I-73/74 as a priority highway to legislators well in advance of the next funding bill,” said Dean. “All six states will be represented,” he said, adding, “That hasn’t happened in 10 years.”

However, Dean is aware that even with more federal financial support, funding will be far short of the estimated \$2 billion needed. “The push is to make this a toll road — a necessary evil to expedite building of the road, and crucial to funding when building new roads,” he said.

The northern states’ presence at events and rallies shows that they still support the corridor, said Dean, even though they don’t face the same economic urgency (as here). Metts said, “Whether Ohio or Michigan have construction imminent has no significant direct impact on the leg in South Carolina. I-73 will still be a very functional highway for what we need it to do ... if it were North Carolina, it would be a different story ...”

Dean’s enthusiasm about the potential of I-73 is infectious, and he believes that others share his desire to keep the project on the fast-track.

“The significance of I-73 can be seen through the support that’s been received in our area, at the state level, and at the national level,” he says.

The AARoads Web site created by Andy Field and Alex Nitzman was last updated July 31, 2005. For the most up-to date information, Dean recommends visiting the National I-73 Association’s official Web site at www.I73.com.

Information is also available at www.I73sc.com, and via links from other sites referenced in this story. Art of the interstate is from the I73sc Web site.

If you're going: The next public meeting for the recommend preferred alternate route for the Northern Project of I-73 s planned to begin a 5:30 p.m. on Aug. 28 in the Cole Auditorium of Richmond Community College in Hamlet, N.C.