

State gets OK to buy land in path of I-73 route

Funding for S.C.'s \$2 billion, 30-mile section uncertain

By Zane Wilson - The Sun News

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Rights of way for Interstate 73 can be bought now that the final federal approval is in hand for the route between I-95 and S.C. 22 near Conway.

The U.S. Department of Transportation's deputy secretary came to a crowded intersection in Myrtle Beach Friday to sign what is called a Record of Decision for the 30-mile section of I-73.

Tom Barrett, second in command to Transportation Secretary Mary Peters, signed the document at the U.S. 501 and Carolina Forest junction that his boss inspected on June 1 and found to be unacceptably clogged.

Barrett said the broad support for the road, its rapid progress and the need for the new corridor to reduce congestion are among the reasons he came for what is normally a routine agency action.

"All those things together clearly have this project on our radar," Barrett said.

The Record of Decision means the S.C. DOT can begin buying the 60 pieces of land that are known to be in the path of the road. The agency has about \$80 million to buy rights of way.

The agency will also hire consultants to draw the exact path of the road, and can buy the rest of the rights of way when the corridor is known.

"We're excited to see the Record of Decision signed, signaling the end of the planning process and allowing DOT to begin purchasing right of way, said Brad Dean, president of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce and the National I-73 Corridor Association.

The document signing is a formality, but an important step that will help move the project along, Dean said.

U.S. Rep. Henry Brown, a longtime backer of I-73 who obtained the project's first federal money, also said the document is a significant milestone.

"I know we keep celebrating these little victories one step at a time," Brown said. "But we had a line on the map, now we got a line in the sand."

Brown, R-Hanahan, said funding for the \$2 billion section of road in South Carolina is still an unknown, as is its completion through the other five states.

"We're going to be hard-pressed to find \$2 billion to do that," he said.

The interstate is to connect the Myrtle Beach area with Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., also traveling through Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia and North Carolina. Pieces of the road have been built or are in construction or planning in North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia but the project is dormant in Ohio and Michigan.

It is expected to be a toll road, but tolls alone will not be enough to build it.

Brown said he hopes for the success of a new nationwide interstate highway initiative that is under study. It would pick about five corridors of national significance and provide them significant funding, he said.

State DOT officials said Friday they will try again for private financing to help with the road, possibly by selling concessions for gas stations and similar services.

An earlier attempt brought few offers, but Dean said there is a feeling among highway supporters that the lower dollar value may attract some foreign investment that would not consider the earlier proposal.

It was the attempt at public-private financing and the road's support that made the U.S. DOT want to give it special attention, Barrett said.

"Your leadership down here, they have been forward-looking in trying to find ways to finance roads," he said.

The Record of Decision came in about half the time it normally takes to get to that point on a major project, for one thing, he said.

Barrett said I-73 has importance beyond opening a corridor to the only major tourism destination in the country that does not have an interstate highway.

The road has "significant economic potential for its entire length" and is "a significant piece of the interstate highway system, he said.

It will reduce congestion on U.S. 501, provide easier emergency evacuation and add to the national network of roads, Barrett said.

The Record of Decision also means that opponents have 60 days to challenge the document in court.

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