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## STATES HAMMER OUT ROUTES, FUNDING

Brock Vergakis The Sun News

Interstates 73 and 74 are designed to link Brunswick County, N.C., and the Grand Strand with travelers from the Great Lakes region, speeding tourist trips to the Carolinas' beaches while also providing a better escape route during hurricanes.

While both proposed roads will end in South Carolina's Grand Strand, it is North Carolina that already has built parts of both interstates and traditionally sends more tourists to the Strand than any other state.

About 22 percent of the Grand Strand's 12.5 million annual visitors are from North Carolina, according to the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce.

Tourism officials in Brunswick County, N.C., say both interstates will be a boon to the tourism industry there.

``We're just excited about that potential in the lower, western part of Brunswick County. I-73 is going to be very significant, too. We're very positive about that. We want [Myrtle Beach] to get it," said Kemp Causey, chairman of the Brunswick County Tourism Development Authority.

Although North Carolina already has picked out the general routes I-73 and I-74 will follow, it still will be several decades before either route is complete, N.C. Department of Transportation Public Information Officer Bill Jones said.

Funding still needs to be secured for the majority of the road, according to N.C. DOT documents.

The recently passed federal highway bill included \$5.6 million for construction and right of way purchase for an interchange at U.S. 74 and N.C. 211 in Columbus County designated as part of I-74.

``The future interstates of I-73/74 are critical components in the continued economic growth and success of North Carolina. Good highways mean good jobs, a better quality of life and improved public safety for all," said U.S. Rep. Mike McIntyre in a prepared statement. McIntyre, D-N.C., represents Brunswick County and southeastern North Carolina.

The federal highway bill also included \$5 million for a study to extend Interstate 20 from Florence into North Carolina. N.C. Gov. Mike Easley wants to extend I-20 from Florence to Wilmington, N.C., to provide direct access to southeastern N.C. beaches and the port of Wilmington from Atlanta.

The Carolinas only recently agreed upon where the two interstates would cross into South Carolina. Construction on the portion of road south of Rockingham that will roughly follow along U.S. 1 and bring I-73 into South Carolina is scheduled to begin in 2009 and finish sometime after 2012, according to the N.C. DOT.

In exchange for building that stretch of road, South Carolina agreed to extend Carolina Bays Parkway in South Carolina to meet I-74 or an I-74 spur at the state line in Brunswick County, N.C.

The N.C. DOT is nearing completion of a feasibility study for the portion of I-74 that would run through Brunswick and Columbus counties.

Funding for that stretch has not been secured, and the southern leg of Carolina Bays Parkway that will connect that road to U.S. 17 in Surfside Beach is taking priority in South Carolina, according to the S.C. Department of Transportation.

The only section of both interstates to be completed in North Carolina is between Rockingham and Greensboro, where U.S. 220 is being upgraded to interstate standards.

Much of I-74 is being built by upgrading existing roads to interstate standards. But like I-73, many new stretches of road also are going to have to be built for I-74.

That includes a northern beltway around Winston-Salem, N.C.

Construction of that beltway was delayed after a 1999 environmental lawsuit required the N.C. DOT to prepare new impact statements that were released earlier this year, according to the N.C. DOT.

Right of way acquisition for some parts of the beltway will begin in 2007 and not finish until 2012. That beltway will connect with U.S. 52, which is being upgraded to interstate standards between the Virginia state line and Winston-Salem. That project also is unfunded.

New roads also will need to be built from the Virginia state line to Greensboro for I-73. North Carolina is obtaining rights of way in Rockingham and Guilford counties and is expected to begin construction on segments of that road in 2008 and finish sometime after 2012.

Funding to connect I-73 south of I-85 in Greensboro to where it and I-74 already are built in Randolph County has not been secured.

Neither has funding to upgrade U.S. 74 to interstate standards, which is what I-74 will follow most of the way east before turning along N.C. 211 into Brunswick County.

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