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STATEHOUSE

Support for I-73 draws ire for DOT

Disapproval over new commissioner heightens tension toward agency

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Vacant DOT seat goes to Georgetown County

COLUMBIA - The state Department of Transportation Commission reaffirmed Thursday that Interstate 73 is its top priority for new construction, but that action set off a tiff in the Capitol over how it was requested and the appointment of a new commissioner.

The I-73 resolution was part of a swirl of activity Thursday surrounding the DOT, reform proposals for the agency, and passage of the House version of the \$7.3 million budget.

The North Eastern Strategic Alliance had called a meeting for Thursday morning to ask the DOT commission to pass a resolution affirming that I-73 is still its top priority. The alliance is a business and legislative group.

Sen. Yancey McGill, D-Kingstree and chairman of NESAs, said the state's congressional delegation asked for the resolution because of the recent turmoil at the DOT.

"They're going after megabucks, and they want to make sure all of us are still on board with it here in South Carolina," McGill said.

"Let them know we're still united behind I-73," said Sen. Hugh Leatherman, R-Florence, to the five DOT commissioners.

DOT Chairman Tee Hooper said he supports I-73 but wanted to wait for a new review of road project priorities. He said the agency has taken a lot of criticism about how it chooses projects and that he wants to study them using criteria such as population and safety.

Hooper said I-73 probably is the top priority, "but I think we need to do the appropriate exercises."

Commissioner Hugh Atkins of Spartanburg agreed.

But Commissioner Bobby Jones said the road has been the agency's top priority for years, and he wrote a resolution reiterating that.

"I may be the only damn one to sign it," Jones said.

Commissioners Marion Carnell of Ware Shoals and Marvin Stevenson of Marion said they would vote for the resolution. Stevenson said he remembers putting up I-73 corridor signs in 1997 when he was chairman of Marion County Council.

Later in the day, the commission voted 4-1 for the resolution. New member Joe Young of Georgetown County voted for it with Carnell, Stevenson and Jones. Atkins was opposed and Hooper did not vote. He votes only to break a tie.

Two hours later on the Senate floor, Sen. Larry Grooms, R-Bonneau, complained that he was not approached to vote on the vacant 1st District seat that was filled by Young, and that the commission was pressured to sign the resolution in support of I-73.

"It's probably a violation of state law," the way the election was conducted, said Sen. Chip Campsen, R-Sullivan's Island, who said he was not notified of the election either.

Georgetown County's legislative delegation obtained Horry County legislators' backing along with some from Charleston County, including Senate President pro tem Glenn McConnell, R-Charleston.

When the signatures of the necessary 16-member majority of the congressional district's delegation were obtained, the election was over and Young could be certified.

Gov. Mark Sanford issued a statement saying the election of Young and the resolution were "incredibly disturbing on a number of fronts" and illustrate why the agency needs to be reformed.

Grooms' remarks came during brief Senate debate on its version of a DOT reform bill. The Senate again adjourned without taking action on the bill.

The House, however, attached its version of a DOT reform bill to the budget. Speaker Bobby Harrell, R-Charleston, said that is because it includes \$40 million in new money for the agency and also to make sure that the bill is discussed by the Senate.

He said the House bill will be debated separately next week and any changes can be revised in the budget later.

Finalization of the budget also saw approval of the allocation of \$5 million for I-73 and I-74. The road receives a total of \$6 million in this year's budget.

The budget, which includes \$81 million for income tax relief, will have routine third reading next week and be sent to the Senate, which is likely to change it sharply. Many senators say they do not like the income tax cut and would rather use the money for needs such as road repair.
