

Sun News, The (Myrtle Beach, SC)
June 23, 2005
Section: FRONT
Page: A8
Column:Editorial

THINK I-74, SOUTH STRAND

South Strand politicians would have their constituents believe that the part of Horry County between Surfside Beach and the Georgetown County line would have to wait years for a limited-access highway if Interstate 73 isn't rerouted into their neck of the woods. Have they forgotten about the deal that the S.C. Department of Transportation cut with N.C. transportation leaders early this year? The upshot of that deal is that the South Strand may get its long-awaited interstate connector before construction even begins on I-73.

Under an N.C.-S.C. agreement forged in February at a transportation summit, the N.C. Department of Transportation agreed to link the S.C. portion of I-73 with the N.C. interstate complex near Rockingham. In return, the S.C. DOT agreed to link the Carolina Bays Parkway, which now ends at S.C. 9, with an Interstate 74 spur planned for Brunswick County, N.C.

The South Strand politicians who have pressed the S.C. DOT to route I-73 through southern Horry County, especially Horry County Councilman Howard Barnard of Surfside Beach and S.C. Rep. Nelson Hardwick, R-Surfside Beach, should think about what that means. No source of funding for the S.C. portion of I-73 has yet been identified - though odds are good that Congress this year will kick loose at least \$20 million for engineering studies and an environmental-impact statement.

But the N.C. DOT already has begun construction on portions of I-74 between greater Charlotte and Wilmington, with planning for the rest well under way. As things stand now, N.C. officials plan to bring that highway to U.S. 17 in northern Brunswick County and build a leg toward Little River to link up with Carolina Bays Parkway. The parkway would become the final stretch of I-74 or an I-74 spur with compatible numbering.

Moreover, the S.C. DOT already has designated a final parkway leg between its current terminus at S.C. 544 and U.S. 17 near Garden City Beach. That leg of the parkway was a Road Initiative Development Effort project for which funding has not yet been found.

The politicians representing southern Horry County should stop tilting at the S.C. DOT windmill over the agency's firm decision to link I-73 with S.C. 22 near Aynor. Environmentally and economically speaking, the DOT's thinking is right on target. Why build an interstate 70-plus miles long when you can build 40-plus miles of road that links with an existing limited-access highway? As well, S.C. 22 ends at the ``right" place - the central Strand near Restaurant Row.

Instead, these gentlemen should be lobbying the DOT to find money to complete the parkway and to build that link between S.C. 9 and the N.C. line. Unless they're determined to destroy parts of the Waccamaw Wildlife Refuge, drive the cost of I-73 into the stratosphere and tie the project up for years in court over environmental issues, that's the fastest, most reliable way to leverage a South Strand connector. That it has an I-74 designation instead of an I-73 designation is immaterial.

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