

Tolls approved to fund I-73: I-73, for South Carolina, could cost \$2 billion, require 80 new miles

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Officials from the S.C. Department of Transportation learned Friday that a request to collect tolls on the proposed Interstate 73 has been approved by the federal government. The proposed interstate — from Myrtle Beach to Sault Ste. Marie, Mich. — will, if built, run through four counties in South Carolina, including Marlboro, Dillon, Marion and Horry counties.

“Bob Lee of the Federal Highway Administration told us that we will have tolling authority for I-73,” SCDOT director Buck Limehouse said.

During a meeting of SCDOT commissioners Friday, Limehouse said I-73 was accepted as one of five pilot projects in the nation that will be allowed to use toll funds for construction.

“It’s the first time ever that the federal government has allowed for tolls to be collected to finance the building of an interstate,” Michael Covington, SCDOT’s director of administration, said.

State lawmakers passed legislation in 2006 that will allow for toll collection to help finance I-73 construction, once it is built.

Covington said the federal program to allow for collecting tolls on I-73 is called “Tolling and Pricing.”

In approving I-73 for tolls, Covington said, interstate planners also were given a great deal of flexibility from the Federal Highway Administration in finding ways to fund the construction of I-73.

In addition to the ability to collect tolls, planners have been given clearance for funding through right-of-way development, which would allow for the marketing of products on the interstate.

Covington said the collection of fees for promotional signs bearing the logos of businesses that pay for the privilege to advertise on the interstate is another possibility. Covington said all ideas being discussed are merely options and the SCDOT is soliciting plans from private entities to help with funding the proposed interstate.

I-73 will cost close to \$2 billion for the South Carolina portion and will require about 80 miles of new interstate construction before it connects to S.C. 22 west of Aynor.

The interstate is likely to take at least 10 years to complete, but that timetable could be accelerated, Limehouse said.

He cited the quick construction of an exchange on Interstate 95 built for Honda of South Carolina Manufacturing Inc. in Timmonsville as an example.

Limehouse also said about \$100 million has been identified to go toward the building of I-73.

As a part of the last Federal Transportation Act, passed in 2005, \$81 million was earmarked for the funding of I-73 within South Carolina. The state also got another \$3 million in federal funds for I-73 in 2005.

Limehouse said he expects the southern portion of I-73 in the state would be completed first.

That part runs east of Interstate 95, west of Latta before connecting with S.C. 22 near Aynor.

The northern corridor of the interstate is planned to run south of Richmond County, N.C., through Marlboro, Dillon and Marion counties before connecting at I-95.