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TOLLS RIGHT FOR I-73?

The \$81 million Congress allocated this year toward construction of Interstate 73 in South Carolina won't come close to paying the projected \$1 billion to \$2 billion cost of the project. The S.C. General Assembly, in concert with the S.C. Department of Transportation, is going to have to come up with most of the difference. The longer legislators want to identify funding sources for I-73, the longer it will be before tourists can roll between the S.C.-N.C. line and Myrtle Beach at unobstructed interstate speeds - and before residents can flee inland from approaching storms with reduced fear of getting trapped in the open.

As our friends in North Carolina have demonstrated, this problem needn't be daunting - if residents and their elected representatives can bring themselves to embrace tolls as part of the solution. This week, Brunswick County, N.C., commissioners petitioned the N.C. Department of Transportation to make that county's hoped-for link to the outside world, Interstate 74, a toll road. The commissioners believe that if the N.C. DOT complies, the road will be completed between the S.C. line near Little River to the metro Charlotte, N.C., area in 10 years. A "free" road would take much longer to be complete because North Carolina, like South Carolina, has limited resources for new highways. As the Brunswick County commissioners noted, North Carolina already has a ready-made vehicle for building a toll road: the N.C. Turnpike Authority. This makes sense. Legislatively created in 2002, the authority is authorized to build up to 10 toll-road projects but only has four on its plate - of which one is the Cape Fear Skyway in northern Brunswick County. That project would connect N.C. 87 across the Cape Fear River to U.S. 421 south of Wilmington.

Rapid completion of I-74, of course, would be good for Horry County, as it would link with S.C. 31 at the state line. But unless South Carolina completes I-73 in roughly the same time frame, a completed I-74 also could drain tourists to N.C. beaches - because those beaches would be easier to reach.

I-74 would be a big project for the N.C. Turnpike Authority to swallow. But the N.C. government has a strong track record of meeting political objectives, once they're set. That's why the S.C. General Assembly would be wise to look at tolling for I-73 near term. Tourism is the only vibrant sector of our state's otherwise stagnant economy. Getting I-73 built is key to keeping it strong.

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