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Top priority: I-73 to Myrtle Beach

Commissioners select \$2 billion interstate plan as most important to state

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The State

A new interstate that would provide faster, more direct access to Myrtle Beach was named the S.C. Transportation Department's top priority Thursday. The decision came hours after a group of Grand Strand-area business and political leaders requested the symbolic approval and a new commissioner was appointed to represent that region.

The resolution, signed by five of the agency's seven commissioners, is in favor of I-73, which would run from Michigan to the coast and is expected to cost \$2 billion in South Carolina alone. Grand Strand officials requested a show of support for I-73 as Congress chooses which highways to fund.

Agency staff said this was the first time the proposed interstate had been designated as the top project.

The resolution got a boost when Georgetown County businessman and former state lawmaker Joe Young was added to the commission Thursday morning. Young was appointed to the vacant 1st Congressional District seat, surprising some Charleston and Berkeley County legislators who said they weren't allowed to vote on Young's appointment.

The changes came as the S.C. House and Senate continue to hammer out proposed changes to the Transportation Department's structure.

"And there are people who think we don't need to reform DOT!" said Sen. Chip Campsen, R-Charleston, during Thursday's debate.

Sen. Larry Grooms, R-Berkeley, questioned whether I-73 should be designated as the top of the highway list without study of its merits.

Likewise, transportation commission chairman Tee Hooper wanted to wait until agency staff finished their ranking of state road projects.

"I think it's a tremendously important project," Hooper said. "I just don't feel comfortable today saying it's our No. 1 priority."

Other commission members disagreed.

“Nobody pressured me,” said Bobby Jones, who represents the 6th Congressional District. “It’s good for the state. It’s good for that area down there.”

Some legislators were upset, too, at the tactics of lawmakers representing Georgetown, Horry and other counties who quietly gathered enough signatures to appoint Young to the commission. Many in the House leadership and the Senate learned of the appointment only after it had been completed.

“I wasn’t even asked. I was disenfranchised. You were disenfranchised,” Grooms said. “It is good-ol’-boy politics at its worst.”

However, Rep. Vida Miller, D-Georgetown, said Young was qualified for the post after serving 13 years on the Santee Cooper utility board.

“He understands the importance of this job,” Miller said. “This individual was selected like every other commissioner was selected. The process is no different.”

Gov. Mark Sanford, who wants to place the Transportation Department in his Cabinet, criticized Thursday’s events.

“What’s gone on today with the DOT is incredibly disturbing on a number of fronts and again highlights the need to depoliticize that agency with reform efforts under way in the House and Senate,” he said.

At least eight legislators from the 1st District asked Sanford and the secretary of state to nullify Young’s appointment because they say it was illegal.

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Joe Young

The new S.C. Department of Transportation commissioner has a long history of public service.

Age: 69

Home: Yauhannah, Georgetown County

Family: Married, with two children. One daughter is deceased.

Employment: Owner of Low Country Forest Products

Experience: Served 13 years on the Santee Cooper utility board; served on a Georgetown County development group; served in the S.C. House in the 1970s

