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WEEK IN THE LEGISLATURE

Tourism funds clear first hurdle

MB chamber gleeful at prospect of money for promotion, I-73

By Zane Wilson
The Sun News

COLUMBIA - Brad Dean said he was ecstatic that \$20 million in tourism promotion funds came through the House Ways and Means Committee last week without a scratch.

"We were loaded for bear on that one," said Dean, president of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce.

It's the most money the state has ever put into tourism promotion, and it spreads the funds around in ways that have not been done before. Some is for known destinations like Myrtle Beach, and other money is to be used to promote little-known spots in the small towns and rural areas across the state.

The budget-writing Ways and Means Committee approved a \$7.3 billion spending plan, which goes to the full House for debate in two weeks. The measure can be changed there and also in the Senate before final passage.

The tourism promotion money drew no comment or questions from any of the committee members.

"We're giving them a boost this year, a big boost," said Rep. Shirley Hinson, R-Goose Creek, who chaired the subcommittee that reviewed the money as part of the state Parks, Recreation and Tourism Department's budget.

The committee wants to see tourism spread around the state and this starts the process of doing that, Hinson said.

Dean remembers a few years ago when there was a major battle to get \$3 million more for tourism promotion.

Tourism and related interests received "at or above everything we asked," Dean said, including \$6 million for Interstate 73. An important thing about that money is that \$5 million of it is recurring, which means that legislators don't have to fight for it every year.

Dean said he expected a fight over the I-73 money but that didn't happen either. In all, Horry County got about \$22 million allocated for projects, although \$10 million Gov. Mark Sanford requested for the airport expansion was deleted because of the uncertainty of airport plans.

Part of the airport got money, though. A \$2 million budget allocation, along with other funds, will pay to build a new general aviation terminal at the airport.

The old terminal, built for the former Air Force base in the 1950s, will be torn down and replaced.

Rep. Tracy Edge, R-North Myrtle Beach, a member of Ways and Means, got most of the earmarks through and said it's the most in special allocations for Horry County and tourism that he can remember.

Bears football

The Carvers Bay High School Bears football team, coaches, principal and district superintendent were celebrated on the House floor Wednesday morning for their 2006 Class A state football championship.

The House usually honors all championship teams, giving them a framed resolution praising their achievement. It was the Bears' second title in five years, and they said they plan to be back again next year.

This week:

Heritage preserves | A House subcommittee returns to the issue of whether horse riding, hiking and other activities should be allowed in Heritage Trust preserves.

The state Department of Natural Resources was told to come back with more information on the preserves and which of them might support more recreational uses.

Heritage Trust preserves are intended to protect significant natural or cultural features, and the DNR says some of those places are not compatible with some recreational uses.

Rep. Alan Clemmons, R-Myrtle Beach, raised the issue last year after he said he was told he could not ride his horse in Lewis Ocean Bay Heritage Preserve.

Horse riding is allowed in the preserve, but it is hard to find out what activities are permitted because brochures or signs are usually not posted on the properties and they do not have on-site staff.

The subcommittee meets at 2:30 p.m. Tuesday in Room 410 of the Blatt House Office Building.

Coastal insurance | At 9 a.m. Wednesday, a House committee will hear from new Insurance Commissioner Scott Richardson on coastal insurance issues.

The spike in coastal property insurance rates is a high-profile issue this year, with legislation under review in both houses.

The committee meets in Room 403 of the Blatt building.

Budget hearings | Senate Finance Committee budget hearings are under way, and a subcommittee will review the Parks, Recreation and Tourism budget, including the \$20 million in tourism promotion money, on Thursday.

The panel meets at 9 a.m. in Room 307 of the Gressette Senate Office Building.

Contact ZANE WILSON at 357-9188 or zwilson@thesunnews.com.