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Trade plan for wetland derailed  
Officials nix draft to compensate for acres lost to I-73

By Zane Wilson  
The Sun News

COLUMBIA - Horry County and other Pee Dee House members failed Wednesday in an attempt to order that wetland acquired by the Conservation Bank be used to make up for wetland damaged by Interstate 73.

Horry County's House members and others from the counties the proposed highway will cross pressed for the amendment in the Conservation Bank's budget during a day-long debate over the state's \$7.3 billion spending plan.

A measure that proposed that any wetland acquired by the bank in the coming fiscal year be used to offset losses for highway construction fell in a 61 to 51 vote.

Local legislators tried again with a proposal that new wetland bought in the coming year be used specifically to make up for the 27 acres expected to be destroyed when I-73 crosses the Little Pee Dee River Heritage Preserve. That fell 66 to 47.

Rep. Alan Clemmons, R-Myrtle Beach, said the state Department of Natural Resources "was not coming to the table to negotiate" with the Department of Transportation on the tradeoff for the Little Pee Dee River preserve crossing.

DNR manages Heritage Trust land, and Clemmons said DNR Director John Frampton promised Wednesday to handle those negotiations personally, so Clemmons withdrew one of the amendments regarding the Conservation Bank.

The DOT is trying to finish its plans for the I-73 section between I-95 and S.C. 22 this spring, and it must describe the compensation for wetland losses in the final plan.

Rep. Ben Hagood, R-Sullivan's Island, said the proposals seem sensible but would interfere with the Conservation Bank's operations because much of its property is bought with a combination of state, federal and private money. Rep. Leon Stavrinakis, D-Charleston, said the bank would become "a slush fund for wetland mitigation" in highway projects.

Clemmons said taxpayers should not have to pay twice for the same land, but other members did not see the Horry County proposal as accomplishing that.

The DNR and DOT should be able to work out the exchange without legislators being involved, said Rep. David Umphlett, R-Moncks Corner.

Conservation group lobbyists worried over the Horry County proposals for two days, asking legislators to oppose it. The wetland compensation should be part of highway construction costs, they argued.

Much of the day was taken up with a variety of proposals from Democratic members who object to using \$81 million in extra money for an income tax cut that will give back about \$5 to the average family.

Rep. Vida Miller, D-Pawleys Island, tried several other proposals for uses for the money, all of which failed mostly along party lines.

She proposed a special economic grants fund to help attract new business.

"We are still the second-highest in unemployment in the nation," Miller said. "You cannot give income tax relief if you do not have an income, for heaven's sake."

The measure was ruled out of order on technical grounds. Another option she proposed was for the money to be used for road repairs, to be divided among the counties. That one was killed 68 to 47, and another to divide it among the 10 planning regions for roadwork died by a vote of 62 to 42.

She also tried to put the \$81 million toward economic development grants and a disaster fund, but both of those were killed on a voice vote.

Rep. Billy Witherspoon, R-Conway, also failed in his requests for \$1.2 million for promotion of state produce, \$1 million for recreational boating and the required transfer of 10 acres of Forestry Commission land to the city of Loris.

The House had hoped to finish the budget debate today but may work into Friday.

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Items passed so far

Tourism promotion | \$20 million

Beach renourishment | \$5 million

Beach drainpipe removal | \$5 million

Myrtle Beach General Aviation terminal improvements | \$2 million

Cherry Grove Inlet dredging | \$1 million

Shared Care | \$500,000

Conway stormwater project | \$230,000

Sea Haven | \$100,000

S.C. Hall of Fame | \$25,000