

## **Transportation officials sign record of decision for I-73's southern leg**

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MYRTLE BEACH — South Carolina's southern leg of Interstate 73 is officially signed, sealed and delivered.

Transportation officials had a press conference Friday near one of Horry County's busiest intersections, Carolina Forest Boulevard and U.S. 501 in Myrtle Beach, to sign the Record of Decision.

The ceremonial signing means highway officials are positioned to start construction on the stretch of interstate that runs from Interstate 95 in Dillon County through Marion County to S.C. 22 (Veterans Highway) in Horry County.

Congressman Henry Brown, who has spearheaded the project in Washington, D.C., for years, S.C. Secretary of Transportation H.B. "Buck" Limehouse Jr. and U.S. Department of Transportation Deputy Secretary Thomas Barrett, were among the dignitaries on hand for Friday's event.

"Myrtle Beach is going to connect the rest of the country to it here," Barrett said. "This road eventually runs all the way up to Canada, and that's a tremendous opportunity. It connects to the highway of the future corridor we're building on (I) 95. It just makes a lot of economic sense. We think it's a smart project."

A lot of people are watching how well the I-73 approval process has gone for South Carolina, Barrett said.

"You've done it in about half the time it normally takes. I think that reflects a great amount of cooperation," he said. "That poses very well for the future of the project, so we're basically signed off at the federal level, and we're ready to move forward with the project."

"One of my objectives is to find out what made that work so well here, and take that back (to Washington) and see if we can spread that around."

Limehouse said the next step for the southern leg of I-73 starts right away. Federal Highway Administration approval of the Record of Decision also allows the SCDOT to move forward and expend federal transportation dollars to acquire the necessary rights-of-way for I-73.

"Next week, we'll be out talking to those landowners and trying to reach an accommodation with them to give them a fair price for their land," Limehouse said.

SCDOT has more than \$80 million set aside to go toward the \$2 billion that will be needed to build I-73. Tolls have been approved to pay for the construction of the interstate, too.

Meanwhile, Barrett said, the Federal Highway Administration will put together a request for proposal for financing that will allow South Carolina to move forward on construction. That's expected to take about a year.

There is a lot of work still under way for the northern leg of I-73. The recommended preferred alternative for the northern portion of Interstate 73 in South Carolina was announced July 19. It begins south of Hamlet in Richmond County, N.C., and travels southeast toward the Carolinas' state line, parallel with S.C. 38 into Dillon County, where it connects with the southern portion west of Latta at Interstate 95.

Mitchell Metts, SCDOT's project manager for I-73, said in an interview with the Morning News in December that finalization on the Environmental Impact Study for the northern corridor of I-73, from North Carolina to I-95 in Dillon County, is expected this spring.

The Record of Decision will likely be signed in the summer. Right-of-way purchasing for the northern leg could begin after that.

The interstate is No. 5 on the U.S. Department of Transportation's list of priority roads and the top priority in the state.

Gov. Mark Sanford's spokesman Joel Sawyer said the governor is scheduled to meet with U.S. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters on Monday in Washington, and one item on their agenda will be the financing of I-73.

Barrett said other states along the I-73 corridor — Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia and North Carolina — aren't as far along in the process as South Carolina.

“Getting people together at the state and local level, getting citizen input, understanding our concerns at the federal level takes a lot of work,” Barrett said. “I think people came together with the spirit that they understand the value the road would add, and they said

‘We’re gonna find a way to make this happen.’”

Barrett said he looks at I-73 as an example of South Carolina forging a new path on how to build roads.

“We want to work very closely to bring that forward as fast as we can,” he said.