

Transportation chief back interstate to relieve beach traffic

By Travis Tritten and Zane Wilson · The (Myrtle Beach) Sun News

Updated 06/02/07 - 12:13 AM

MYRTLE BEACH -- The head of the U.S. Department of Transportation and Sen. Lindsey Graham surveyed one of the area's most congested intersections Friday and vowed support for a planned interstate highway to the beach.

DOT Secretary Mary Peters visited the intersection of U.S. 501 and Carolina Forest Drive around 11 a.m., watching a solid line of traffic as far as she could see.

"It is time to build I-73," Peters said. "We are doing what we can to ensure (U.S.) 501 does not become the biggest parking lot in South Carolina."

Peters is the "most powerful person in Washington when it comes to transportation needs" and the visit will help draw crucial federal support for Interstate 73, said Graham, R-Seneca.

Peters' visit to the busy intersection was a side trip from her main purpose for coming to Myrtle Beach, which was to promise support to the newly reorganized National I-73 Corridor Association.

She told the 200 people who attended the I-73 meeting she learned something at the intersection.

"It isn't called 'Grand Strand gridlock' for nothing," Peters said.

The federal DOT can award funding for road projects such as I-73, and the secretary sets priorities that can be influential when Congress is doling out road funding.

Peters said national transportation policy is not working, and a prime example is "the 25 years just to build I-73."

Those are the years since the road was first identified by Congress as a need, she said.

"It has taken us far too long to get to this point," Peters said.

The highway would connect the Grand Strand with Michigan and help ease traffic jams on local roads, like that at U.S. 501 and Carolina Forest Boulevard, where Peters and Graham viewed vehicles queued up into the distance.

The highway would draw 2 million to 3 million more visitors to the area annually, spur job growth and allow a quicker evacuation when a hurricane hits the coast, said Brad Dean, president of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce.

"To make this happen, we have to expose the problem to the people in Washington," Graham said. "After this visit, I believe it will be easier for me and this delegation to sell this project."

I-73 is a national need, not just a local one, and its place in the system will become even more crucial when the Panama Canal is expanded in the next few years, Peters said.

Shippers are waiting to use a larger canal to come to East Coast ports and they will need better connections, such as I-73. Her agency is committed to pushing for projects such as I-73 that serve large corridors rather than spending money on isolated projects that serve comparatively few, Peters said. Graham told the group that Peters is "the most important person in America when it comes to building roads," and that her understanding of I-73 is significant.

But it is also important for a corridor-wide group of supporters to work on the project, Graham said.

"Working together, these six states can build an interstate highway that will benefit us all," Graham said.

The other member states "honor us" by basing the organization in South Carolina, "and we're going to deliver for you," he promised.

The corridor association lay dormant after about 1995. Dean agreed to take it over and will be its executive director.

The chamber has agreed to put in \$50,000 to get the organization going and has hired a coordinator.

State Rep. Alan Clemmons, R-Myrtle Beach, was elected chairman of the new group. He is also president of the S.C. I-73 Association.

Representatives from the transportation departments of South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia described what their states have done and are planning.

Ohio and Michigan halted work on I-73 in the late 1990s, but supporters who attended from those states said they intend to go home and try to get the ball rolling again because it appears the highway is going to become a reality.

"I had no idea the amount of new construction that was going on down here," said Ann Hughes, president of Adrian Area Chamber of Commerce in Adrian, Mich.

She said she will work on reactivating the Michigan I-73 association and put it to work on urging the Michigan DOT to put the road back on the planning table.

Steve Carter, director of Scioto County Economic Development in Portsmouth, Ohio, said he was involved in the earlier corridor association and continues to believe the highway is necessary for his area in southern Ohio.

He said he intends to discuss the road with the new administration in Ohio as well as help to reactivate his state's I-73 association.

Besides working on renewed organizing for I-73 support in their own states, members of the corridor association plan a gathering in Washington in the fall to meet with the legislative delegation from the six states and to lobby other key members, Clemmons said.

"We're now focused on the 2009 highway reauthorization bill," he said.

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