

Two NESAs projects at a standstill
Regional data shows economic progress

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By Terry Ward
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Two of the North Eastern Strategic Alliance's high-profile projects are at a standstill, but data for the region shows economic progress, according to reports presented during NESAs Board meeting Friday in Marion County.

NESA is a partnership between government, elected officials and private sponsors with the purpose of promoting economic development in Chesterfield, Darlington, Dillon, Florence, Georgetown, Horry, Marion, Marlboro and Williamsburg counties.

Fred DuBard, chairman of NESAs Regional International Airport Committee, told board members that a study being conducted by Columbia's Wilbur Smith Associates to determine the need for a regional airport won't be ready for at least a month.

"We got some preliminary numbers, but the numbers were not accurate," he said.

DuBard said more people board planes, especially in Myrtle Beach, than was reported in the Wilbur Smith study.

"We've asked them to go back and we expect to get it back in the next 30 to 45 days," he said.

The Regional International Airport feasibility study was started in the first part of 2007 to see if there's enough air traffic in the triangle of Florence, Myrtle Beach and Wilmington, N.C., to warrant a large regional airport.

The airport research, along with the building of an International Trade and Convention Center in Myrtle Beach and the construction of the proposed Interstate 73, are NESAs top three initiatives.

Doug Wendel, chairman of the International Trade and Convention Center, said plans for the \$180 million to \$200 million trade and convention center are at a standstill with limited airport capacity in Myrtle Beach.

Officials overseeing the Myrtle Beach International Airport were unable to agree on a plan that would have led to the construction of an additional terminal at the airport last year.

Wendel said the air traffic capacity for the airport could be reached in as little as 10 years. He said the problem of limited capacity will have to be resolved before plans for the trade and convention center can move forward.

In other business, Coastal Carolina University's Dr. Don Schunk, a research economist, said reports showing retail sales were down in December and higher unemployment rates in December don't necessarily mean the country is headed for a recession.

Schunk said he expects the next six months to be a time of uncertainty, and perhaps a slower economy. But, he said, there are some signs of strength in the economy, including historically low interest rates and lower-than-recession-level initial unemployment claims.

"I'm optimistic about the economy," he said.

Schunk also said the weak dollar in global markets can be good for the NESAs region because of the high amount of foreign investment in the area. He also said the weak dollar encourages tourists, especially from Canada, to visit the Grand Strand.

Job growth in the NESAs region, which was 3.9 percent in 2006 and 2.2 percent in 2007, outpaced the national and South Carolina average for job growth, Schunk said. He also said per-capita income growth was better in the NESAs region than the national average in 2007.