

## **VDOT: No timetable on I-73 start**

May 20, 2008

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Martinsville Bulletin

The beginning phases of the construction of part of Interstate 73 in Henry County probably will not begin in 2011, even though that date is in a draft Six-Year Improvement Program, state transportation officials said Monday.

“We don’t know” when the project will start, said Heidi Coy, public affairs manager for the Virginia Department of Transportation’s (VDOT) district office in Salem. “Everything is on hold” until a lawsuit is resolved.

Virginians for Appropriate Roads, an activist group, filed suit in federal court in Richmond in October, claiming “significant, irreversible and adverse effects on natural, scenic, and ecological resources” will occur if I-73 is built.

Neither Coy nor another VDOT spokesman, Jason Bond, knew when that suit might be resolved. They also could not speculate as to when the construction process for I-73 might begin.

The Six-Year Improvement Program includes the construction of 3.6 miles of I-73 near Martinsville to start in 2011. But preliminary work such as designing the highway and acquiring rights of way must occur before pavement is laid.

As a result, it likely would be at least two years after the initial phases begin before construction could start, George Lester of Martinsville, vice chairman of the National Interstate 73/74 Corridor Association, has said.

The date of 2011 included in the program “was really just a placeholder” on the project list that was necessary to receive some federal funds, Coy said.

“It was sort of a best case scenario date,” Bond said, adding “there really wasn’t anything to base it on.”

If 2011 was a firm date, VDOT staff could begin the thought processes and start looking now at “what can we do with the money we have,” he said.

But even that is on hold due to the lawsuit, Coy and Bond indicated.

They said about \$13.3 million in federal and state funds have been reserved for I-73 so far, but the interstate’s entire stretch through southwest Virginia — from Roanoke to the North Carolina line — is estimated at \$4 billion. That includes preliminary work as well as actual construction

Coy said the final draft of the Six-Year Improvement Program will include a notation that I-73 is on hold, if another start date cannot be determined.

Lester, who also is chairman of JobLink, an organization of Piedmont-area leaders pushing for I-73's construction, said Saturday he was "ecstatic" to see the 2011 date in the program.

He said Monday that he was disappointed to learn about the holdup.

"But we press on" in efforts to get I-73 built, Lester said. "Anything worth having is worth fighting for, working for and praying for."

I-73 is set to run through Henry County east of Martinsville. However, an alternate route proposed by some area business leaders and supported by county officials would take I-73 closer to Martinsville and Patriot Centre at Beaver Creek industrial park.