

VDOT official: Change would slow I-73

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By MICKEY POWELL - Bulletin Staff Writer

Interchange locations along the planned Interstate 73 could be modified to suit economic needs, a state official said Thursday.

But any consideration of altering the highway's overall route through Henry County could delay construction for "a couple of years," said Rob Cary, I-73 project manager for the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT).

Speaking to the Martinsville-Henry County Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, he based his statement on a route change approved for a stretch of I-73 through Roanoke to accommodate a historic district there.

Henry County businessman Max Kendall has suggested an alternative route that would take I-73 closer to Martinsville and the Patriot Centre at Beaver Creek industrial park. The alternative route would use part of the U.S. 58 bypass and have more interchanges than the approved route, supporters say.

The alternative route also would be closer to the Martinsville Industrial Park, Martinsville Speedway, Patrick Henry Community College and a soccer complex planned along the U.S. 58 bypass.

I-73's path through southwest Virginia, which has been approved by the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB), would take it through Henry County north and east of Martinsville.

Cary said that route was chosen because it will help both Martinsville and Danville. He noted that the CTB chooses routes based on how roads would affect regions, not just localities.

A map of I-73's approved route shows potential interchanges with U.S. 220 and Virginia 87 near Ridgeway, Virginia 650 (Irisburg Road) near Axton, U.S. 58 and Virginia 57 near Laurel Park and Virginia 108 near Franklin County.

In April, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) issued a record of decision for I-73 in Virginia, which clears the way for the design phase.

Depending on the FHWA's wishes, if rerouting the interstate through Henry County is considered, "the potential is there" for all of I-73's stretch through southwest Virginia to be re-examined, Cary said. "Once you go down that route, you don't know what issues are going to come up."

However, he said VDOT wants to connect I-73 to “where there is economic activity.”

With the FHWA’s record of decision, the next step is beginning in-depth surveying for the approved route, which is along a 600-foot-wide corridor, and deciding the exact path I-73 will take, according to Cary.

Public meetings will be held on various portions of the interstate before they are built, and people will be able to voice their opinions on any exact routes chosen, he said.

“There will be at least two opportunities (to speak) on every piece” of I-73 built, “and there will be many pieces,” each probably no more than 5-6 miles long, Cary said, adding that the entire highway cannot be built all at once.

Still, the CTB must be persuaded to start designing and building I-73, said Cary.

All interstates — both planned and existing — compete against each other for state funds, he said.

And, “there are many needs on the interstate system” already, such as the widening of I-64 between Richmond and the Tidewater region, Cary said.

No schedule has been set for designing and building I-73 or for acquiring rights of way from property owners, Cary pointed out.

About \$13.3 million — including about \$8.8 million in federal funds — has been allocated for I-73 so far. But the entire Virginia portion of the highway could cost nearly \$4 billion, based on cost projections for 2017, Cary said.

Cary added that the entire stretch of I-73 through Virginia could take 20 to 25 years to build.

“It’s certainly not a quick process,” he said.

Securing funding for I-73’s design and construction is one of the top priorities on the chamber’s legislative agenda for fiscal 2008.

“Our goal right now is to beg for funds, I guess,” said Paul Ashbrook, the chamber board’s vice chairman for membership services. “We’ll need to be the best beggars in the world.”

Ultimately, it will be up to Dana Martin, the region’s representative on the CTB, to push for more funding for I-73, as well as for construction to begin, Cary said.

“I think the CTB feels like it’s a priority,” though, because it already spent a lot of money on preliminary work for I-73, he said.

He urged people to voice support for the interstate during a public meeting on VDOT's Six-Year Transportation Improvement Program, to be held at 6 p.m. Oct. 24 at the Salem Civic Center.

The state spends money on projects it thinks will be most appreciated by the public, Cary said, so "it's very, very important (to attend the forum) if you're interested in seeing 73 move forward."