

Veto of I-73 funds 'bizarre'

Lawmakers hope to restore budget item

May 29, 2008

By Zane Wilson
The Sun News

COLUMBIA --Local lawmakers were puzzled Wednesday by Gov. Mark Sanford's veto of the \$1 million annual allocation for Interstate 73/74 in the state budget.

The veto was one of 69 the governor made in the \$7 billion budget, from which he slashed \$72 million.

Sanford said \$1 million isn't enough to build I-73, so an allocation for that amount is unnecessary. He said he would work with lawmakers to find a way to fund the \$2 billion road that is planned to connect Horry County with an interstate highway.

"How bizarre, odd," said Sen. Luke Rankin, R-Myrtle Beach.

"It doesn't make sense," said Rep. Nelson Hardwick, R-Surfside Beach.

The veto is "shortsighted," said Rep. Alan Clemmons, R-Myrtle Beach, chairman of the six-state National I-73/74 Corridor Association.

"It sends the wrong message to the federal government of support from South Carolina," Clemmons said.

Rep. Doug Jennings, D-Bennettsville, co-chairman of the S.C. I-73/74 Association, said the federal delegation has been urging the state to show its support for I-73 by putting up money, and the budget allocation is one way to do that.

"I'm disappointed that the governor chose to veto this money that applies to such an important road project that will help the entire state," Jennings said.

Rep. Tracy Edge, R-North Myrtle Beach, is the other co-chairman of the state I-73 association. He said the money has been in the budget for five years and it is helping to build a base for the road funding that could be used to issue construction bonds.

"It is the only state money we have put toward these projects, and it is vital that we come up with a permanent funding plan," Edge said.

Edge said he believes legislators will override the veto.

Sanford said one of his aims in the vetoes was to restore \$20 million to cover the shortage for school bus fuel caused by rising gas prices and \$8 million for a shortfall at the Corrections Department.

Other goals were to save some money toward the \$10 billion liability for employee benefits, restore funds to the Medicaid reserve and reduce programs that have guaranteed payouts in future years, Sanford said.

About \$100 million from the Medicaid reserve was used to balance the budget. Sanford said in rough economic times, Medicaid demand will rise, and the reserve is needed.

Edge, whose subcommittee oversees health spending, said the reserve had \$270 million, and it was Sanford's own idea to use it to balance the budget because the governor's initial spending plan took \$30 million from that pot.

"It was the prudent thing to do," rather than make 8 percent across-the-board cuts or other sharp reductions, Edge said.

"I don't think that conservatives think we should hoard money," he said.

The House may deal with the vetoes today, or put them off until next week.