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Virginia gets go-ahead for I-73 leg

By Zane Wilson
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COLUMBIA - Design work for Interstate 73 in Virginia is under way after the Federal Highway Administration approved the state's application to build a 72-mile section of the road.

"We're excited. That's good news," said Brad Dean, president of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce. "That's a critical link."

I-73 is planned to link Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., and Horry County. Tourism interests back the highway because Myrtle Beach is the largest tourism destination in the country without an interstate link.

Dean said the action in Virginia is important because it means all four Southern states along the corridor have active work under way on the road and it shows "a cohesive move toward progress."

With work under way in four states, it will be easier to unite for federal money, he said.

Ohio and Michigan have no active plans under way for I-73.

The approval in Virginia came March 30, four months after the Virginia DOT filed the application.

"We have cleared a major milestone in the development of I-73," said Virginia DOT Salem District Administrator Richard Caywood in a Friday news release from the agency.

The approval comes almost five years after the DOT's board voted to build the highway between the N.C.-S.C. state line and Interstate 81. It took most of the next four years to prepare what is called the Final Environmental Impact Statement. The document amounts to an application to the federal government for approval to build the road.

The rest of the link in Virginia is not under study, but motorists would have the connection with I-81, which intersects farther south with the planned I-73 corridor in West Virginia.

I-73 was designated by Congress in 1991 as a priority corridor for a new interstate. Its original destination was Detroit to Charleston, but changes since then have it linking Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., at the Canadian border, to S.C. 22 near Conway.

The 60-mile portion of I-73 in South Carolina is under study and moving toward its Final Environmental Impact Statement. The eastern section between S.C. 22 and Interstate 95 is about a year ahead of the western section in planning. The impact statement for the eastern part of the road is expected to be filed later this year.

West Virginia has built part of its portion of I-73, and North Carolina has several sections of the road open, with much of the rest under construction.

South Carolina's leg of the highway is expected to cost \$2 billion. It has been approved as a toll road, but tolls won't be enough to pay all the costs of construction, and a money stream has not been identified.

Dean said finding ways to pay for I-73 are the goal of the newly reactivated I-73 Corridor Association. The group formed in 1991 but almost died out by 2000. The chamber took over the organization last fall and is organizing a new association that will work for funding.

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