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Vote on preserve crossing on hold Board to review I-73 plan in May

By Zane Wilson
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GEORGETOWN - The state's Heritage Trust Advisory Board agreed Thursday to keep negotiating with the state Department of Transportation on compensation for the Interstate 73 crossing of Little Pee Dee River Heritage Preserve.

"We're saying we're not saying no now," said board member Rodger Stroup.

But the board will not meet again until May, and that could delay finalizing plans for the southern half of I-73 in South Carolina, said Mitchell Metts, the road's project manager at the DOT.

Board members, meeting at Santee Coastal Reserve near Georgetown, said they are concerned about taking such a big step and setting a precedent. So far only a few acres of Heritage Trust preserves have been taken for public use for a utility line.

Department of Natural Resources staff member Ed Duncan said the crossing adjacent to the existing S.C. 917 bridge at the Horry-Marion county line will take 34 acres but will affect 590 acres. That will cause yearly management costs of up to \$50,000 more than the agency currently pays to care for the property.

I-73 is planned to connect Horry County with Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., at the Canadian border. It will have about 60 miles of highway in South Carolina and is expected to cost about \$2 billion.

To get from its entry point into the state north of Bennettsville, to the planned connection with S.C. 22, or Conway Bypass, north of Aynor, the road must cross the Little Pee Dee River. Parts of the river corridor are in the Heritage Trust program, but all of it is eligible and is valuable habitat, Duncan said.

He said if I-73 is going to be built, the proposed route is the cheapest, shortest and has the least effect on the environment and other resources.

But in addition to taking 34 acres for the bridge, the highway will affect an area about a mile in each direction that could no longer be burned off to control the habitat. It would be impossible to do that around an interstate highway, Duncan said.

For another mile beyond the first mile, the DNR would have to spend extra money and take special precautions to burn, Duncan said.

He said the staff has not figured exact costs or what to ask the DOT to pay. He wanted to see if the board wanted to proceed before getting into the details.

"It's going to be a lengthy process," Duncan said.

"We have not had anything like this before," said Barry Beasley, director of Heritage Trust programs for the DNR.

Stroup said he wants to know how much the DOT can pay, "and at that time I'd be more comfortable seeing if we want to take this precedent-setting step."

"I think it's dangerous" to approve the concept this early, said board member Fritz Hamer. "We're here to protect the Heritage Trust property."

Metts, who did not attend the meeting, said later the crossing is the best one environmentally, chosen with input from 15 agencies that worked on the road plan.

"I feel confident that we've crossed the Little Pee Dee River in the best place," Metts said. But the DOT is required by federal law to compensate for the loss to the preserve, and it will do that, he said.

As for how much, "we can sit down at the table and talk about it," Metts said. "We need their cooperation, and we acknowledge that."

He also said the delay in getting an approval from the board, which must make a recommendation to the DNR board, "can affect our timeline."

He hoped to file the final report with the Federal Highway Administration this spring to get permits to begin construction.

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