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Want to go to a S.C. beach? You might have to pay a toll

Money collected would be used to help pay for highway improvements

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It could get pretty costly to drive to S.C. beaches.

The state's Department of Transportation is looking into adding toll lanes on Interstates 95, 26, 20 and the future I-73 to pay for highway improvements and as a way to reduce congestion.

In September, the federal government named the stretch of I-95 running from Virginia to Florida a "Corridor of the Future." That designation gives the states along that stretch the option to create toll lanes to raise money to fix up their sections of I-95.

Michael Covington, the S.C. DOT's director of administration, said the idea of putting tolls on I-95 is still "purely conceptual," but there is the possibility of adding toll lanes only to the most heavily used stretches of South Carolina's interstates

Because the concept is still in its infancy, it is unclear how much it would cost to drive in a toll lane.

S.C. Secretary of Transportation Buck Limehouse said toll lanes would have to meet conditions already set by state law:

- Money collected by new tolls on interstates must be used exclusively to fund improvements on those highways.
- Tolls on interstates must be removed after the money they've collected covers the cost of the improvement they were installed to fund.
- Tolls can be placed only on existing interstates with the permission of the state legislature.

Limehouse also said the DOT is looking into placing tolls on new highways, such as South Carolina's future portion of Interstate 73, which eventually would link Myrtle Beach with Michigan.

Covington emphasized: "There is no concrete plan yet. I'm hoping ... that since this corridor has been identified as important by the federal government, that Congress will make some more federal money available for it because we have all kinds of maintenance needs."

Limehouse told The Greenville News last week that the agency plans to move forward with the I-95 tolls in spring, but there is no timeline yet on other interstates.

There are only two toll roads in South Carolina: the Cross Island Parkway on Hilton Head Island and the Southern Connector, just south of Greenville.