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Welcome centers construction frozen

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The N.C. House pulled the welcome mat out from under two new welcome centers on Interstate 73/74 in Randolph County Wednesday, freezing the construction of the roadside stops until state officials consult the legislature.

The bill, approved unanimously, also requires state commerce and transportation departments to consult a legislative committee before authorizing the construction of any new welcome centers.

Lawmakers moved in March to halt the Randolph County centers, at least temporarily. They would be the only welcome centers not located at the state line and the only location with a center on both sides of the highway.

The Randolph County centers grew out of miscues between two state agencies. The facilities originally were slated as visitors centers, which are operated by counties in the region, but were elevated to welcome centers. The difference is that, while federal funds will pay to build the centers, the state operates welcome centers at a cost of \$180,000 each per year.

Transportation officials said the Commerce Department insisted on promoting the facilities to welcome centers. Commerce officials said they should have been told of the visitors center plans much earlier, since the centers would be placed on highways. They want all centers along highways to be welcome centers so that the state offers consistent services and messages.

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Read tomorrow's Charlotte Observer for more details on this developing story.