

Work on I-73 set for 2011

May 18, 2008

By MICKEY POWELL - Bulletin Staff Writer
Martinsville Bulletin

The beginning phases of the construction of part of Interstate 73 in Henry County are scheduled to get underway in 2011, according to a draft Six-Year Improvement Program, a funding plan for highway projects developed by the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB).

The interstate's approved route takes it through the county north and east of Martinsville. The Six-Year Improvement Program includes the construction of a 3.6-mile stretch of I-73 locally.

George Lester of Martinsville, vice chairman of the National Interstate 73/74 Corridor Association and chairman of JobLink, an organization of community leaders in the Piedmont area of Virginia and North Carolina that is pushing for I-73's construction, said he was "ecstatic to see that date in the plan."

Lester said that "2011 is the first public date ever designated for building I-73 in Virginia." Staff at the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) apparently think it is feasible to start the construction process during that year, he said.

However, the first phases of construction do not involve laying pavement. They involve designing the highway, right-of-way acquisition and engineering, said Lester, estimating that will take at least two years. But he hopes engineers can "get started on the engineering right away."

Having part of the interstate in the six-year program "finally puts I-73 within reach," he said.

"There is funding available to start drawing up construction plans, and all of the approvals have been granted," he added.

Lester said he understands that about \$20 million in federal and state funds have been reserved for I-73, but much more is needed. VDOT estimates that construction of the interstate's stretch from Roanoke to the North Carolina line will cost \$1.4 billion, he said.

Lester said he has asked the CTB not to do anything to delay the timetable and to accelerate the project if possible.

Public comments on the draft six-year program will be accepted until June 1. Residents can show support for I-73 — as well as gratitude for the interstate being put in the six-

year plan, Lester said — by signing petitions available at several convenience stores in Martinsville and Henry County.

Residents also can send brief notes to SixYearProgram@VDOT.Virginia.gov. Letters can be mailed to: Commonwealth Transportation Board, Programming Director, 1401 E. Broad St., Richmond, Va., 23219.

Lester has recommended starting construction of I-73 at the Virginia/North Carolina line and going north for about four miles to connect with Virginia 87.

“It’s highly desirable to begin at the border, where we already have an agreement with North Carolina about where I-73 will cross, and this segment must connect to an existing road,” Lester said.

Some area business leaders have proposed an alternative route for I-73 that would take it closer to Martinsville and the Patriot Centre at Beaver Creek industrial park in the county. That route, which has been endorsed by the Henry County Board of Supervisors, would have more interchanges.

Lester said he has no objection to a study of the alternative route “as long as the study would not delay or jeopardize construction of I-73.”

The first segment is not part of the proposed alternative route, so the construction and the study could occur at the same time, he said.

Economic developers have said that I-73 will help Henry County-Martinsville lure new business and industry that will create much-needed jobs in the area. Martinsville’s current 12 percent jobless rate is the highest in the state.

Lester said that a report by Chmura Analytics and Economics, a Richmond firm, “shows that building I-73 will yield a two-to-one return on its cost and bring in thousands of jobs over an extended period of time,”

“For any business, that type of return is outstanding,” he said.