

Building I-73 is in the state's best interest

By Richard Eckstrom – S.C. Comptroller
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Supporters of a proposed stretch of interstate connecting I-95 to Myrtle Beach recently got a couple of pieces of welcome, long-awaited news. A judge dismissed a lawsuit that had been holding up the project, and Gov. Henry McMaster proposed using \$300 million from the state's revenue surplus and available federal funds to kickstart construction.

Those are some significant developments for a project three decades in the making.

It was 30 years ago this month that Congress passed the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, an overhaul of federal transportation policy that, among other things, aimed to improve efficiency and economic productivity by linking highway, rail, air, and ocean transportation. That law also proposed a number of “high priority corridors;” among them was I-73, which initially was planned to run from Charleston to Detroit.

The end point for the planned interstate was later changed from Charleston to Georgetown, then later to an area between Myrtle Beach and North Myrtle Beach, and now to connect to Highway 22 near Conway.

The project has been mired in delays, the most recent of which was a 2017 lawsuit by a conservation group challenging the permitting process used by U.S. Army Corp of Engineers. That lawsuit’s recent dismissal breathes new life into I-73.

Any project of this magnitude is sure to cause concerns for some folks, and this plan admittedly has its critics. It’s hard not to sympathize with I-73 opponents, who worry about its impact on their local community, their wallets, and their way of life. Still, I strongly believe completing I-73 is in the state’s overall, long-term interest.

Supporters say it would boost tourism by reducing travel time to the Grand Strand, the state’s biggest tourism draw.

It would also strengthen the regional economy -- and thus, the state economy -- by allowing more efficient transportation of people and goods. It would attract new industry by offering increased access to the state’s new “inland port” in

Dillon. This “inland port” quickly and cleanly moves cargo containers via rail to and from the Charleston port, thereby lessening truck traffic on our crowded highways.

And it would address another critical need that doesn’t receive the attention it should: better coastal evacuation. The crowded Grand Strand has no interstate highway service, and that’s a major problem during emergencies. An interstate would allow people to evacuate and reach safety faster. I also believe it’d make it easier to convince those reluctant to leave that they should.

Of the project’s estimated \$1.6 billion total cost, the state expects to shoulder almost \$800 million -- with plans for a \$430 million federal contribution and \$350 million from local governments to cover the rest. The Governor’s \$300 million proposal would be a large down-payment on the state’s \$800 million share, and it could provide the needed incentive to begin construction on an initial six-mile phase connecting I-95 to Highway 501 near the Dillon County town of Latta.

Two-thirds of the Governor’s proposed \$300 million would come from last year’s revenue surplus, while \$100 million would come from unspent federal money the state received under a program publicly touted as “COVID relief” – but which actually allows wide latitude in how this federal money can be spent.

In reality, our state has the existing resources to commit the entire \$800 million state share at this time, made possible by \$1 billion in surplus revenues from last year that remain unspent.

Of course, spending decisions are ultimately up to the Legislature, not the Governor. If history is any indication, lawmakers will be divided on the issue. Let’s hope they carefully consider the Governor’s proposal and all that the new

interstate would mean for our tourism industry, our statewide economy, our safety, and our future.

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