

# Opinion

## I-73 is too expensive; there's a better alternative

**“Build it and they will come,” say backers of I-73. More tourists, manufacturers, distribution centers... in other words, jobs. We've heard these kinds of promises before, haven't we? If I-95, the main north-south highway along the East Coast, hasn't attracted all these big employers to Dillon County or other distressed, rural counties along its route. Why should we expect a different outcome along I-73 in Dillon, Marion or Marlboro or Horry counties?**

**“But what about all the road construction jobs that will put unemployed people in those counties to work? There's no guarantee that those jobs will go to local people. Often, big road construction contractors come in with their own employees and stay around just long enough to finish the job. Sure, they'll pump some money into the local economy's hotels and restaurants for a while; then they'll go back where they came from.”**

**“Maybe, but so many tourists will flock to Myrtle Beach because they'll be able to get there so much faster. That'll mean more jobs!” Not so much faster — it might shave 10 minutes off the trip. SC 38/US 501, which I-73 would parallel, is already a 60-65 mph, 4-lane highway and the main route for tourists going to Myrtle Beach. The biggest bottleneck is US 501 from Conway to Myrtle Beach.**



I-73 won't do a thing about that, because the new construction will end where it intersects the SC 22 Conway Bypass about 6 miles east of US 501. Few tourists travel SC 22, a \$400 million project with very little development at its interchanges. They take the more direct US 501 route into Myrtle Beach.

**Rebecca Carr**

If the jobs claims are questionable, the real problem is the price tag — \$2.4 billion dollars for the 80-90 mile South Carolina portion of I-73.

Where is that kind of money going to come from in our current fiscal climate? Federal funds are getting harder to come by and require a 20 percent state match. South Carolina has a 20-year maintenance backlog for its roads and bridges, SCDOT's been having trouble paying its bills, and it just deferred tens of millions of resurfacing contracts because it's low on cash. I-73 isn't on SCDOT's list of top-priority projects, yet powerful backers of I-73 have attempted to co-opt \$105 million of SCDOT's remaining bonding authority to build an interchange on I-95 and 6 miles of highway to the south toward the small town of Latta in Dillon County.

This represents 30 percent of a \$344 million bond proposal that would take SCDOT to 85 percent of its bonding capacity, leaving little cushion for funding debt service for emergency repairs. SCDOT is demanding that Latta spend \$500,000-700,000 (money it doesn't have) to move water lines to make way for the road's construction.

This is just a small example of the expenses local communities will have to bear for this road to be built and for utilities to be put in place to enable development along its path.

The good news is there's an alternative to I-73 that could achieve its goals sooner and at much lower cost, with a great deal less destruction of homes, businesses, farmland, woodlands and wetlands than I-73 would cause.

The “Grand Strand Expressway” — upgrading SC 38/US 501 from I-95 to Conway to allow for faster, safer travel — would cost about \$150 million, compared to \$1.3 billion to build a new I-73 about 6 miles to the east.

Ohio and Michigan chose upgrading existing roads over new construction of I-73, and North Carolina did so for I-74. It's an option that works and leaves money in state coffers for other much-needed road maintenance and improvements like the widening that's already planned for US 378, US 521, and SC 9 leading into the Grand Strand area. The same strategy could be used to connect I-95 with I-74 at Rockingham, NC, for much less than the \$1.1 billion it would cost to build the northern section of I-73.

South Carolina needs better roads in the Pee Dee and elsewhere, but I-73 isn't the answer. It's too costly for all levels of government, for the towns and businesses it would bypass, and for the environment. I-73 is a project we simply don't need and can't afford!

Rebecca Carr is the Natural Resources Chair for the League of Women Voters of the Florence Area.