

# The Post and Courier

## SCDOT should reject I-73, back less costly option

Wednesday, August 24, 2011

On Aug. 9, 2011, state Treasurer Curtis Loftis demanded accountability and transparency at the Budget and Control Board meeting. Treasurer Loftis stated that the S.C. Department of Transportation is facing a \$50 million deficit and reported that many contractors and road workers are not being paid on a regular or timely basis.

If we can't pay for road work being done today how can the SCDOT, a few Horry County legislators, the Chamber of Commerce and business leaders ask South Carolinians to support the exorbitant cost of the proposed I-73 plan?

The League of Women Voters of South Carolina promotes transparency and engages the citizenry in democracy through participation in all facets of governments, such as attending public meetings and offering comments on issues of concern and importance. Most governmental bodies offer time for public comment at scheduled meetings because they understand that government can maintain public confidence only when it informs and listens to citizens.

Unfortunately, on June 16, 2011, SCDOT commissioners voted 5-2 to reject a public comment period at regular board meetings. The commission's decision to limit public access is consistent with a vote earlier this year to use most of its remaining bonding capacity for the next decade on a package of controversial road projects, including an interchange for I-73.

The I-73 proposal is for a new 73.3-mile, four-lane divided interstate highway from Rockingham, N.C., to Horry County, connecting to a point part way along S.C. 22. The estimated cost of the project is \$2.37 billion dollars. The proposal calls for building the highway in two segments: The high priority southern segment from I-95 to S.C. 22 would cost \$1.29 billion; the northern segment from I-95 to Rockingham would cost \$1.08 billion.

Not only is the SCDOT unable to fund current transportation projects that are much needed for our state, at this time the department has no funding source or permits for the construction of I-73.

The LWVSC agrees that transportation routes to Myrtle Beach are clearly in need of improvement; however, we do not consider or support the proposed I-73 as a viable option. A report by the transportation consulting firm Smart Mobility finds that a new interstate is unnecessary and proposes an alternative route called the Grand Strand

Expressway (<http://coastal-conservationleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/grand-strand-xpwy.pdf>).

The report proposes connecting primary tourist routes 38/501 with I-95 to the Myrtle Beach area. Upgrading Routes 38/501 would cost \$150 million versus \$1.29 billion for the new I-73 segment.

The proposed I-73 plan would impact the environment more than the majority of us will ever see in our lifetimes. It would require destruction of over 3,000 acres of farmland, hundreds of acres of wetlands, as well as damage nationally important swamps near the Little Pee Dee River. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is recommending denial for I-73 as proposed. While many states are working today to restore their wetlands, it is ironic to hear of plans to lose so much of the very reason tourists are attracted to the South Carolina coast in the first place.

The LWVSC supports regional and coordinated transportation services that efficiently and economically meet community needs and enhance planned growth, but do not adversely affect the environment. We believe Smart Mobility's proposal for the Grand Strand Expressway would be a better fiscal and environmental choice for our state. Not only would the environmental impacts be minimized with this alternative route, but the upgrades versus new construction would also save taxpayer dollars and could be phased in as funding becomes available.

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