**[The Fiscally Responsible Alternative to I-73](http://coastalconservationleague.org/the-fiscally-responsible-alternative-to-i-73/)**

The South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT), Horry County politicians and their special interests have been advancing the construction of an interstate from Rockingham, NC to the Myrtle Beach area since the mid-90s. The impetus for I-73 came from Congress that defined in legislation “Priority Corridor 5” stretching from Michigan to South Carolina passing through Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia and North Carolina. I-73 in South Carolina gained momentum when SCDOT received federal funding for the required Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process required by the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA). SCDOT divided I-73 into two segments the high priority Southern segment from I-95 east to SC 22 just west of Myrtle Beach and the Northern segment from I-95 north to Rockingham, NC. CCL was very involved in the EIS process attending all of the meetings with the federal and state agencies that would be commenting on the EIS. Throughout the process CCL pressed for using an existing road corridor vs. a new alignment to reduce costs and environmental impacts.

In 2007 the southern segment EIS was completed. SCDOT’s proposed route was a new alignment between two existing road corridors (SC 38/ US 501 and SC 9). The EIS lacked a mitigation plan for the impacts to over 300 acres of wetlands. A year later SCDOT completed the EIS for the northern segment; it too had no mitigation plan for environmental impacts. For the next two years little was done publically to advance the proposed interstate due to a lack of funding, but behind the scene the politicians and special interests worked to find money and federal support for I-73. In 2010 SCDOT received $ 10 million dollars in federal transportation stimulus funding. The money was designated to purchase right-of-way for one of the southern segment interchanges in rural Dillon County. The strategy was to get this $ 185 million “interchange to nowhere” built to demonstrate South Carolina’s commitment to I-73, but SCDOT had not submitted an I-73 permit application. In late 2010 CCL working with the Southern Environmental Law Center argued successfully to the SCDOT Commissioners that SCDOT could not segment the I-73 permit application; the entire 73 miles would have to be permitted before any work could begin on a section of the road. SCDOT complied and submitted the I-73 permit application for both the southern and northern segments to the Corp of Engineers and DHEC in January.

Since January the Horry County politicians and their special interests have been pounding the streets for their $ 2.4 billion interstate. As I mentioned CCL has always recommended upgrading an existing road corridor vs. building a new alignment. In January when SCDOT submitted the I-73 permit application, CCL asked transportation consultants, Smart Mobility, to look at the feasibility of upgrading existing road corridors compared to building a new road.

Smart Mobility’s Grand Strand Expressway: An Alternative to the Proposed I-73 to Myrtle Beach, focused on the southern segment between I-95 and SC 22. It is this segment that most interests I-73 supporters. The Smart Mobility study showed that upgrading SC 38/501, the existing four lane road, would cost significantly less, $150 million vs. $ 1.29 billion (between I-95 and SC 22) and likewise the environmental impacts were significantly less than building I-73. Working with the Southern Environmental Law Center, CCL submitted extensive comments on the I-73 permit application focusing on the lack of a comprehensive study of alternatives like upgrading SC38/US 501. The Environmental Protection Agency echoed our concerns of the lack of an adequate alternatives study, and went so far as to recommend to the Corp of Engineers that the I-73 permit be denied. The Corp and DHEC are continuing to review the I-73 permit application along with the public’s and agencies’ comments. There is no specific date for a Corp decision on the permit.

In April Horry County politicians, special interests and members of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce went to Washington to lobby for I-73 funding. They were basically told there is no federal money for the road; the state will have to come up with their own funding. In response Danny Isaacs, Chairman of the SCDOT Commissioners and one of I-73′s strongest proponents worked discreetly to put together a bond proposal that would provide I-73 with some funding, while giving tidbits to interstate projects in the other Commissioners’ districts. At the June SCDOT Commissioners meeting a $344 million bond proposal, with $105 million going to I-73 was introduced, and basically approved. This bond issue will use up 85% of SCDOT’s bonding capacity. With the Commissioners’ nod SCDOT is now preparing the bond proposal’s financial documentation before presenting it for approval to the Joint Bond Committee, a 10 member joint legislative committee chaired by Senate Budget Committee Chair, Hugh Leatherman and House Ways and Means Chair, Brian White. If the Joint Bond Committee approves the bond proposal will go to the State Budget and Control Board for final approval before being presented to Wall Street.

What is so ridiculous about this bond proposal is that the $ 105 million for I-73 is to be used to begin building the $ 185 million “interchange to nowhere” in Dillon County; an interchange that will likely stand idle for years. The interchange will use up needed funds to replace bridges, maintain existing roads and upgrade 38/501.

There is a fiscally responsible solution, the “Grand Strand Expressway” aka SC 38/ US 501; it’s being used by tourists today to get to the beach; taxpayers have already spent millions on improvements to the corridor; and it can be further improved at less cost than the proposed “interchange to nowhere”. CCL will continue to build state-wide support among taxpayer associations, legislators, businesses, individuals and organizations for upgrading an existing corridor vs. a new alignment. We will use this broad-based support to influence decision makers to reconsider using taxpayer money for I-73 and to vote against the $ 344 million bond proposal.

Nancy Cave
Coastal Conservation League
North Coast Office