

Concept would build I-3 to U.S. 129

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Money to study an interstate highway connecting Knoxville to Savannah, Ga., via Blount County is included in a federal transportation bill being hammered out now in a conference between the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate.

Sponsors in both chambers are proposing a route that would follow U.S. 129 from the Tennessee-North Carolina line to the Pellissippi Parkway. No further details of the route were available.

"Right now, this is just a study," stressed Don Walker, deputy chief of staff for U.S. Rep. John J. Duncan Jr. "It's safe to say it is not going to go through the (Great Smokies) National Park. I know Congressman Duncan wouldn't support putting an interstate through there."

Both the House and Senate versions of the Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users include \$400,000 to study two new interstates. Interstate 3, tentatively named to honor the 3rd Infantry Division, would connect Knoxville to Savannah, Ga., while Interstate 14, tentatively named for the 14th Amendment, would connect Augusta, Ga., with Natchez, Miss.

The provisions were authored by Georgia Reps. Charlie Norwood and Lynn Westmoreland and Georgia Sens. Saxby Chambliss and Johnny Isakson. All are Republicans.

Walker said Friday that the money is earmarked only for a study by the U.S. Department of Transportation. Once that study is finished, proposed routes would go before each affected state's Department of Transportation and then on to the communities that would be affected, he added.

"It is hard to say (Duncan) supports or doesn't support something he can't see," Walker said. "Once the study is produced, he would look to the local communities to see what they feel about it."

John Stone, communications director for Norwood, said Friday that "no one knows what the route is going to be." Norwood and other Georgia lawmakers have submitted to USDOT "routing guidelines" showing Interstate 3 would follow Ga. 17 to U.S. 129 to Pellissippi Parkway, but Stone stressed, "It's not going to tear down downtown Maryville."

“You've got to take into consideration community impact, environmental and archeological concerns and cost,” he said.

That Interstate 3 would end up following a different route is not the only possibility, though, Walker said.

“It is possible the study would come back, no one would like any of the routes and the interstate would never be built,” he said.

Current language calls for the study to be completed by Dec. 31, but Walker said an extension may be requested, depending on when the final version of the bill is approved by both houses.

Local officials waiting

Transportation officials close to Blount County said Friday they have no additional information about Interstate 3.

“This is the first I've heard of anything of that nature,” said Highway Superintendent Bill Dunlap.

Officials at the Tennessee Department of Transportation and the Knoxville Regional Transportation Planning Organization said they had heard of the concept, but were waiting to see what happens on a federal level.

“That is really not in our court right now,” said TDOT spokesman Travis Brickey, noting his only information came from a press release sent when former Georgia Rep. Max Burns proposed the idea last year. “This is very, very early in the process.”

Jeff Welch, director of the TPO, said he also heard about the Interstate 3 concept through a press release last year.

“I put the paper aside and said, ‘Let's wait and see what Congress does,’” Welch said. “There is a tremendous amount of work that would have to be done to identify routes, so saying where it would be is way premature.”

Interstate 3 is not included in the long-range plan TPO approved in April, added senior transportation engineer Mike Conger. The long-range plan, which is updated every three years, extends to 2030.