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Contact: Lisa Jones-Turansky, 843-723-8035, lisajt@scccl.org
Chris DeScherer, Senior Attorney, SELC, 843-720-5270
Alex Dadok – 843-723-8035, alex@scccl.org

Innovative alternative to I-526 expansion could spare environment and local communities

Proposal submitted to SCDOT for review

Charleston – An alternative to the proposed expansion of I-526 would cost less, reduce congestion, and lessen the impact on the environment and nearby communities. The Southern Environmental Law Center, on behalf of the Coastal Conservation League (“League”) has requested that the South Carolina Department of Transportation explore this alternative in the forthcoming environmental study for the extension of the Mark Clark Expressway.

“Before we build a \$420 million highway expansion, the DOT has an obligation to look at all alternatives, especially those that are cheaper, more effective and less damaging,” said Lisa Jones-Turansky, a project manager for the League. “Moving forward on the Mark Clark expansion without looking at this option would be an irresponsible waste of taxpayer money and scarce DOT resources.”

The proposed alternative, designed by an internationally renowned transportation planning firm, would significantly improve traffic on Savannah Highway, Folly Road and Maybank Highway. The alternative would also have less of an impact on the environment and the communities of West Ashley, James Island and Johns Island. Further, the functional alternative would provide greater redevelopment opportunities for the City and County of Charleston that could also serve to enhance walkability, bikeability, and transit opportunities. The proposal, called a “New Way to Work” would cost \$207 million – less than half of the DOT proposal.

DOT’s proposed expansion, which the agency says is needed in order to meet anticipated traffic growth and to improve hurricane evacuation routes, was estimated in 2005 to cost \$420 million. However, as highway construction costs rise, the final cost of the project could climb to more than \$900 million by its completion.

Furthermore, the DOT proposal calls for the filling of approximately 100 acres of wetlands and two crossings of the Stono River, a river already considered too polluted by the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control. Also, DOT's proposal could be constructed through the James Island County Park, causing a significant loss of county park revenues, and one of the most important public recreation areas in Charleston County.

In addition to examining the impacts of possible routes and design of the expansion, SCDOT is legally required to examine a "reasonable range of potential alternatives."

"The Department of Transportation is required by federal law to consider all reasonable alternatives to its proposed expansion of I-526," said Chris DeScherer, senior attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center. "The 'New Way to Work' alternative must be given serious consideration as it could provide a cheaper, more effective way to meet the transportation needs for the region."

The New Way to Work functional alternative represents a modern day solution to traffic congestion, where mobility can be enhanced from giving drivers more choices for reaching their destinations. By giving drivers additional options, local traffic can be reduced on overburdened arterial roads and highways, which enhances the mobility of vehicles needing to travel through these corridors. The enhanced street networks in this case could relieve over half the traffic on major roads by distributing the local traffic away from the major roads.

The proposal to expand I-526 comes as DOT is facing one the worst funding crises in its history. The SCDOT has recently identified over \$48 billion in highway and local mass transit needs but only identified approximately \$19 billion to pay for them. At the same time, DOT has identified an urgent need to improve highway safety in the state. South Carolina currently has the 8th highest highway fatality rate in the nation.

For more information about the proposed alternative, please visit www.newwaytowork.com.