



This chapter explains the history, of the I-73 project, how potential impacts were evaluated, and why the project is important to the region.

Chapter 1. Purpose and Need for Action

Introduction

1.1 What is the I-73 project?

I-73 is a national highway project that will provide a transportation corridor from Michigan to South Carolina. The national I-73 project starts at Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, and proceeds through portions of Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia, and North Carolina, before terminating near the Myrtle Beach, South Carolina area (refer to Figure 1-1).

Currently, Michigan has upgraded existing roads to interstate standards and has one 50-mile segment remaining to construct. A twenty mile segment has received funding to complete design and begin purchasing right-of-way. Since the route would follow existing roadways along the I-73 corridor, Ohio has decided not to construct a new facility for I-73. Instead, Ohio is addressing individual congestion issues along the existing roadways. West Virginia has completed a small portion of I-73, also known as the King Coal Highway and Tolsia Highway. West Virginia is waiting on additional funding prior to completing the I-73 corridor project. Virginia has completed a Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for its portion of I-73 that was approved by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) on December 1, 2006. FHWA issued a Record of Decision (ROD) for the I-73 Final EIS in Virginia on March 30, 2007, allowing the final design process to begin for the project.¹ The Virginia Department of Transportation is currently resigning the portion of I-73 along the existing roadway and will proceed with construction of I-73 on new

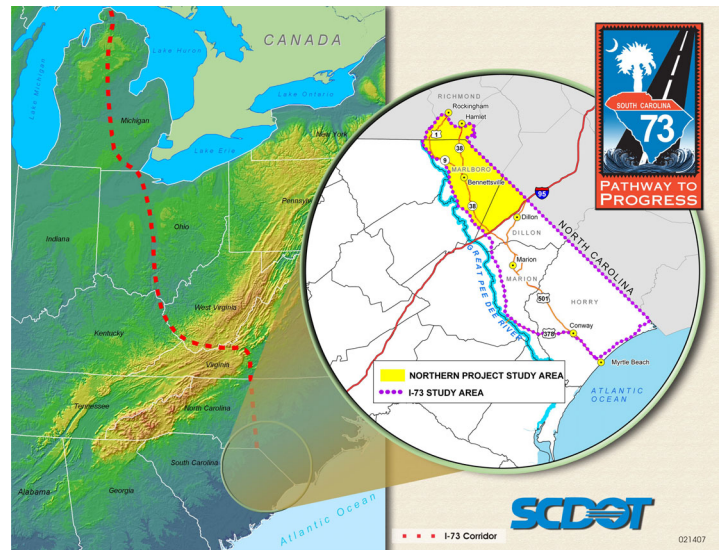


Figure 1-1 Interstate Corridor

¹ VDOT Website, I-73 Project Webpage, <http://www.virginiadot.org/news/newsrelease.asp?ID=SAL-07-127> (April 16, 2007).



alignment as funding becomes available.² North Carolina has also completed portions of I-73 by the re-signing of existing roads to interstate facility. The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) is currently completing environmental analyses, planning phases, and right-of-way acquisitions for its portion of I-73 on new alignment. South Carolina has completed a Draft EIS for the portion of I-73 from I-95 to the Myrtle Beach area (I-73 South) that was approved by the FHWA on May 30, 2006.

This EIS has been prepared to evaluate and document the potential benefits and impacts that would result from the construction of I-73 from I-95 north to future I-73/I-74 (I-74) in North Carolina. Based on a resolution, the NCDOT and South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT) have agreed to work together to extend I-73 from the South Carolina state border to Rockingham, North Carolina, where it would connect to I-74. The NCDOT also agreed to participate in the environmental and planning phases of the project as well as share a proportionate cost of the studies needed to complete the project.³ In addition to this EIS, there are 10 Technical Memoranda that provide supporting documentation and are hereby incorporated by reference into this EIS. The Technical Memoranda are available for review at the local libraries within the project study area or can be requested by contacting the SCDOT I-73 Project Manager (refer to signature page for contact information). These Technical Memoranda include the following:

EIS Project Evaluation

Although the national I-73 project extends from Michigan to South Carolina, this EIS only evaluates the portion from future I-74 in Hamlet, North Carolina to I-95 in Dillon County, South Carolina.

- *Alternative Development Technical Memorandum;*
- *Community Impact Analysis Technical Memorandum;*
- *Cultural Resources Technical Memorandum;*
- *Economic Analysis Technical Memorandum;*
- *Hazardous Material Technical Memorandum;*
- *Indirect and Cumulative Technical Memorandum;*
- *Noise Technical Memorandum;*
- *Public Involvement Technical Memorandum;*
- *Traffic Technical Memorandum; and,*
- *Natural Resources Technical Memorandum.*

1.1.1 Where is the project located?

The portion of the project to be analyzed in this EIS is located from I-95 in Dillon County, South Carolina, to the I-74 in Richmond County, North Carolina, and encompasses 399,792 acres (refer to

² VDOT Website, I-73 Project Webpage. <http://virginiadot.org/news/newsrelease.asp?ID=SAL-06-69> (December 26, 2006).

³ Refer to resolution in Appendix A, entitled *Resolution by the Board of Transportation on the Collaboration of North Carolina and South Carolina on Planning for Routes Crossing Their Common Border*, dated March 3, 2005.



Figure 1-2). The project study area extends northwest from I-95, is bounded to the east by the North Carolina/South Carolina state line, extends northeast into southern Richmond County (North Carolina) and eastern Scotland County (North Carolina), is bounded to the north by I-74, and to the west by the eastern edge of the Great Pee Dee River floodplain.

1.1.2 What would the I-73 facility be like?

The proposed I-73 facility would be a high speed, divided, fully controlled access roadway that would require interchanges for access. Existing access to properties would be maintained by the use of frontage roads, while existing traffic patterns would be maintained by providing overpasses for east and west traffic flow.

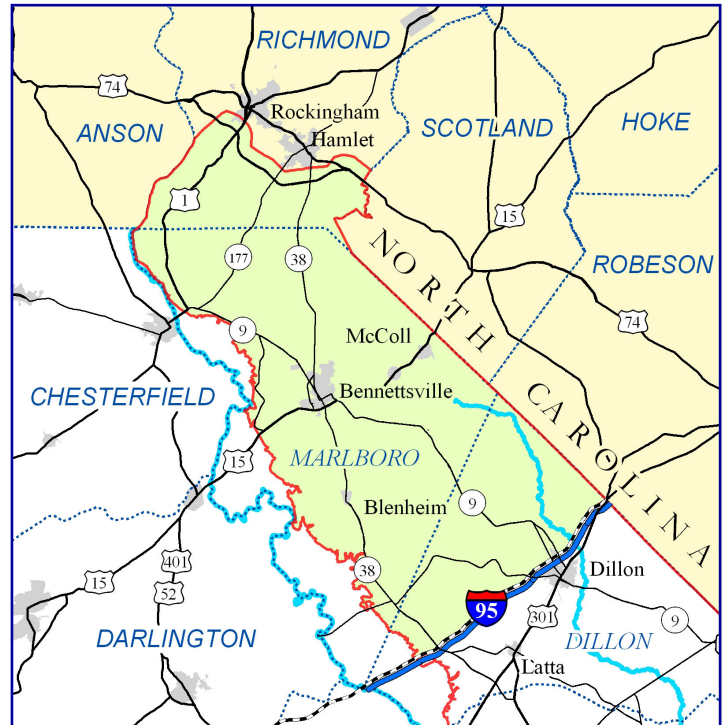


Figure 1-2 I-73 Project Study Area

Two typical sections were developed to accommodate the number of lanes needed for the future traffic volumes, as well as a multimodal corridor. Figure 1-3 (refer to page 1-5) represents the interim design, which would be initially constructed and accommodate two lanes of traffic in each direction. An approximately five-foot, wire fence would be constructed along the right-of-way of the proposed project to create a physical barrier to control access to the interstate. In the future, when traffic volumes increase to a point that additional lanes are necessary in order to maintain an acceptable level of service, an additional lane in each direction could be added to the median.

This ultimate design would accommodate three lanes of traffic in each direction; refer to Figure 1-4 (page 1-6). A 400-foot right-of-way would be acquired when frontage roads are needed so that additional right-of-way would not be required for the ultimate design. Where frontage roads are not essential, a 300-foot right-of-way would be adequate.

1.1.3 Why was the project initiated?

The I-73 Corridor was identified as a High Priority Corridor by the United States Congress in the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) of 1991. Congress designated high



Interstate 73: I-95 to North Carolina



priority corridors as those that would provide the most efficient way of integrating regions, linking major population centers of the country, providing opportunities for increased economic growth, and serving the travel and commerce needs of the nation. The corridors that Congress designated were to be included in the National Highway System. Congress wanted the FHWA, along with the states, to develop long-range plans and feasibility studies for these corridors, and focus federal funds towards these areas for road construction. The proposed project is the segment of the I-73/I-74 High Priority Corridor between I-95 and I-74 and is currently listed as number five on the National Highway Systems High Priority Corridors list.⁴

A corridor feasibility study was conducted in 1994 after ISTEA was approved and identified the I-73/I-74 corridor as a high priority. This study evaluated the upgrading of existing roads starting at the North Carolina state line at U.S. Route 1 in Marlboro County, going through Dillon, Marion, Horry, Georgetown, or possibly Williamsburg and Berkeley Counties, and ending on the U.S. Route 17 corridor near the city of Charleston, South Carolina in Charleston County.⁵

The Transportation Equity Act (TEA-21), enacted in 1998 by Congress, built on what ISTEA had established by continuing and improving the current programs, while establishing new initiatives. TEA-21 shortened the I-73/I-74 High Priority Corridor by changing its terminus from Charleston, South Carolina, to the general vicinity of Myrtle Beach, Conway, and Georgetown, South Carolina.

A second feasibility study was completed by SCDOT for I-73 in South Carolina in June of 2003. The study was done in response to the change of the I-73 terminus from Charleston, South Carolina, to the Myrtle Beach, South Carolina area by TEA-21. The study cited the needs for I-73 as fulfilling congressional intent and providing an interstate link to the Grand Strand area along with the benefits of improved hurricane evacuation, improved capacity for vehicular and freight movement in the area, and support of population and economic growth.

The feasibility study recognized that there had been some improvements to roads in the project study area; however, the improved roads were predicted to have capacity problems along some segments by the year 2025, based on traffic modeling. Future traffic projections indicated that I-73 would divert traffic from existing roadways, thereby improving capacity and reducing traffic congestion.⁶

North Carolina completed a feasibility study in 2005 that evaluated alternatives for the proposed I-74 in Columbus and Brunswick Counties, North Carolina, located in the southeastern portion of the state. The study was an initial step in the planning and design and described the project, costs, and identified potential problems that required consideration.

⁴ 23 U.S.C. §1105(c) (1991, as amended through P.L. 109-59).

⁵ SCDOT, *I-73 Feasibility Study* (April 1997).

⁶ SCDOT, *I-73 Feasibility Study* (June 2003).

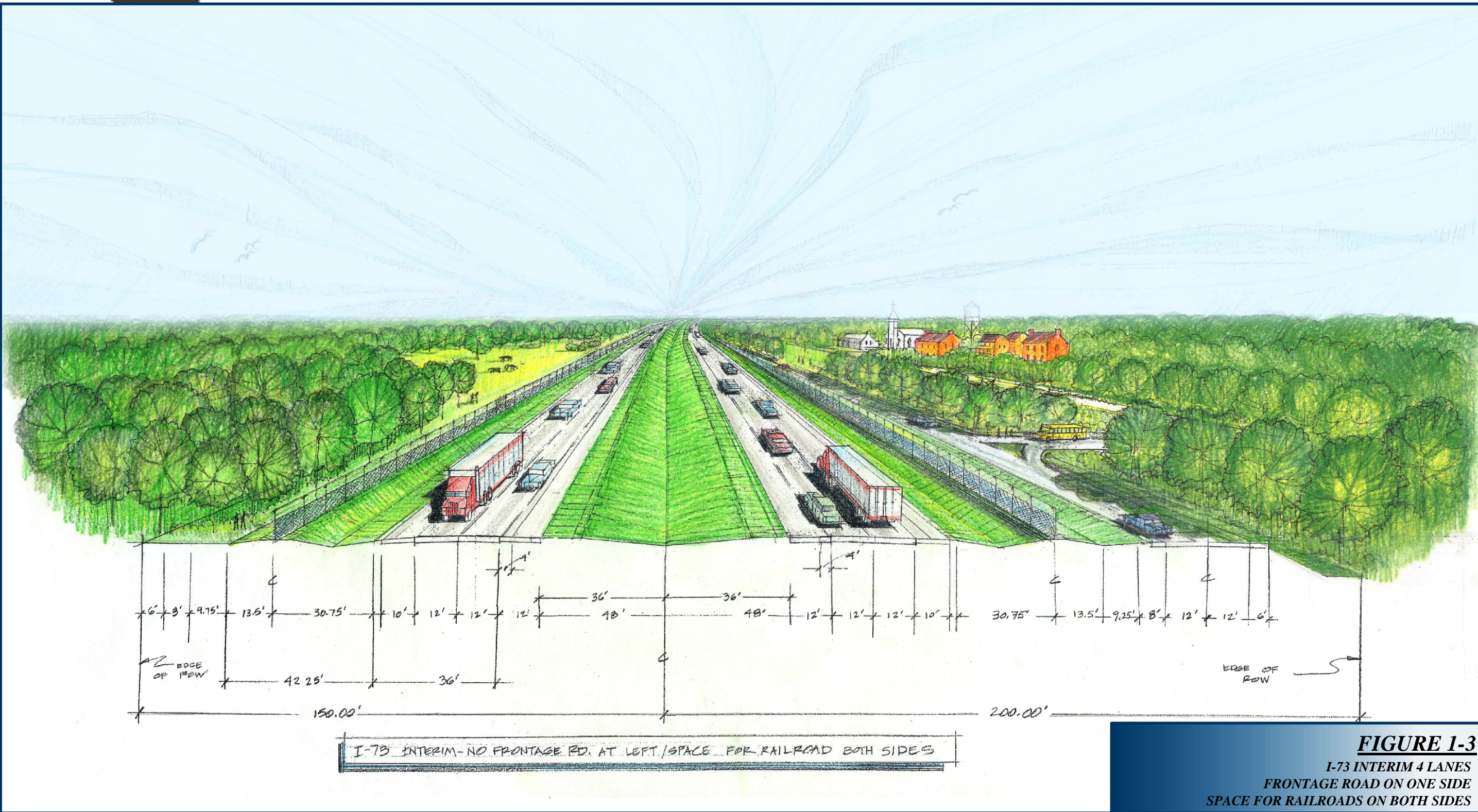


FIGURE 1-3
 I-73 INTERIM 4 LANES
 FRONTAGE ROAD ON ONE SIDE
 SPACE FOR RAILROADS ON BOTH SIDES

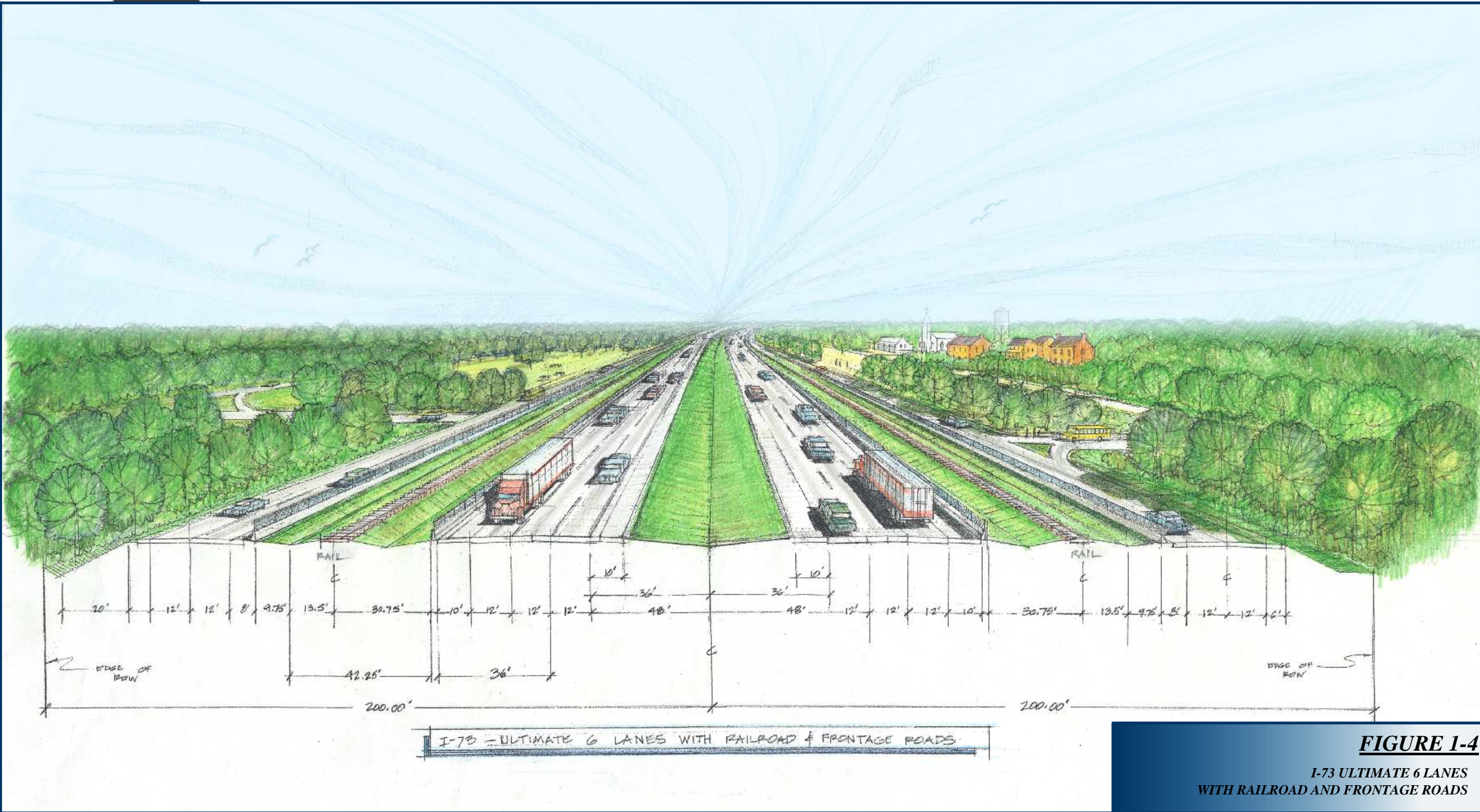


FIGURE 1-4

I-73 ULTIMATE 6 LANES WITH RAILROAD AND FRONTAGE ROADS