

Gov. McMaster Using Federal Lobbyists to Help Get I-73 Funding, Records Show

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by Rick Brundrett - The Nerve

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A lobbying firm hired by Gov. Henry McMaster at \$15,000 a month to help get federal disaster funding also has been working on the controversial Interstate 73 project in the state – including a proposed meeting with President Donald Trump, newly released records from the Governor's Office show.

The open-ended contract, however, with Adams and Reese LLP, a registered federal lobbying and law firm with 18 offices across the South and in Washington, D.C., doesn't specify anything about obtaining funding for the I-73 project, which has spent some 37 years on the drawing board.

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The Nerve last month [revealed](#) that the S.C. Department of Transportation since 2004 has spent at least \$77 million on the I-73 project – though not one drop of concrete has been poured for the actual interstate – and can't account for how a collective \$8 million authorized under an annual state budget proviso was spent over the period.

From January through September of this year, the Adams and Reese firm, which also lobbies S.C. agencies through its Columbia office on behalf of multiple corporate clients and private organizations, billed the state a total of \$135,000 for its services, according to records released Thursday by the Governor's Office under the S.C. Freedom of Information Act.

The Nerve first [reported](#) about the contract in August. McMaster spokesman Brian Symmes said then the governor hired Adams and Reese to "help secure" federal disaster aid in the wake of Hurricane Florence last year, citing a September 2018 letter from McMaster to the state's congressional delegation asking for their support for an estimated collective \$1.2 billion in federal disaster-recovery requests.

Symmes didn't mention then that Adams and Reese also was working on the I-73 project and didn't respond to The Nerve's questions about specifics of the work done by the firm. Trey Walker, McMaster's chief of staff, sought the contract under the state's emergency procurement law, according to records provided at the time to The Nerve.

The Nerve subsequently submitted a formal open-records request for all monthly reports this year provided by the firm to the Governor's Office, as required under the contract. The office on Thursday released nine monthly billing statements that typically included one-line descriptions of the work that the firm said it did that month, plus summaries to McMaster of disaster-funding legislation in Congress.

Symmes didn't immediately respond to written questions Friday about the firm's work on the I-73 project and other matters. The state DOT earlier this year submitted an application for a \$348 million federal grant to design, acquire remaining rights-of-way and construct the southern leg of the proposed interstate from U.S. 76 in Marion County to S.C. 22 in Horry County.

In a Feb. 26 letter to U.S. Department of Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao, a copy of which was included in application records provided to The Nerve last month by the state DOT, McMaster said he supported the "Infrastructure for Rebuilding America" (INFRA) grant, noting the I-73 project is "vital for both our state's continued economic progress and for public safety."

Records released Thursday to The Nerve show that INFRA grant issues or the I-73 project was specifically cited in documents covering eight of the first nine months of this year. Those

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Documents listed meetings or phone calls involving Adams and Reese lobbyists and federal DOT officials; U.S. Rep. Tom Rice, whose 7th Congressional District covers the Myrtle Beach and Pee Dee areas where the proposed I-73 would be located; members of Rice's staff; or U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham's staff.

Details of the discussions about the project were not provided.

In a July 12 memo to McMaster, Jeff Brooks, an attorney-lobbyist and chairman of Adams and Reese's Executive Committee, and Jordan Marsh, a member of McMaster's staff who works on federal issues, noted that a meeting was proposed with McMaster, Rice, Graham and President Trump to discuss federal disaster funding and "other tasks such as making part of the (U.S.) DOT's \$1.6 (billion) supplemental appropriation available for the I-73 Evacuation Project."

It's not known whether the meeting with Trump was scheduled or held; McMaster spokesman Symmes didn't respond to that question, among others submitted Friday by The Nerve.

As with McMaster, Rice, Graham and U.S. Sen. Tim Scott submitted a joint letter earlier this year to U.S. DOT Secretary Chao supporting the \$348 million INFRA grant application for the I-73 project, according to a copy of the letter included with the application packet.

The records released Thursday don't include any specific references to disaster-funding meetings or phone calls involving Adams and Reese lobbyists and members of South Carolina's congressional delegation other than Rice, his staff or Graham's staff.

In a November 2018 letter to McMaster – about a month before the governor hired Adams and Reese – Rice said that within 10 days after Hurricane Florence "made landfall," the S.C. and N.C. congressional delegations were able to "successfully appropriate \$1.68 billion to address long-term recovery needs."

Walker Truluck, Rice's legislative director, and Brooks did not immediately respond Friday to messages from The Nerve seeking comment.

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