

Testimony of **Peter Mills, Executive Director**  
**Maine Turnpike Authority**  
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation  
**To Support LD 905**  
**An Act to Authorize the Construction of a Maine Turnpike Connector to Gorham**  
March 23, 2017

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Senator Collins, Representative McLean and distinguished members of the Committee, as Executive Director of the Maine Turnpike Authority (MTA), I support LD 905 because the MTA is best positioned to address in an environmentally sound way the worst chronic traffic situation in the state of Maine.

Seventy years ago this year, the Maine Turnpike Authority opened New England's first superhighway – now Interstate 95 between Kittery and Portland. As a result, a chronic traffic problem – coastal Route One gridlock – was addressed and the economy of the whole state was markedly advanced. This solution was made possible because in 1941 the Maine Legislature had the foresight to create the MTA and allow it to determine how revenue bonds and tolls paid directly by road users could support the construction and maintenance of the highway. Innovative funding was necessary because there was no feasible way at that time for federal, state or local governments to fund major highway solutions.

Fast forward to today. We face another chronic traffic problem in southern Maine. Although smaller in scale, daily rush hour congestion on Route 114, Route 22, and Running Hill Road is certainly the worst in Maine. In several locations, traffic backs up for over a mile and simply stops for indeterminate periods every morning and evening. Wasted fuel, degradation of air quality, and profound losses of human productivity are daily occurrences. These roads are congested, unreliable and unsafe. The daily traffic is devastating to the villages, residences and residential areas through which they pass.

In December 2008, after many years of discussion and work, the Maine Department of Transportation (MaineDOT) opened the Bernard P. Rines Bypass, being the 3.3-mile limited-access portion of Route 112 that runs from Route 25 to Route 114 in Gorham. Funding largely by federal earmarks that no longer exist, the Rines Bypass achieved its purpose of alleviating congestion in Gorham center. However, the lack of a limited access connection from the Bypass to the Interstate has shifted the problem to the south, and traffic growth has made it worse.

To address the rest of the problem, the 123rd Maine Legislature directed the MTA and MaineDOT to conduct a study “of existing highway infrastructure and future capacity needs . . . Cumberland count[y] including the Greater Gorham . . . area.” See Resolve, 2007, Chapter 95 (LD 1720). During what became known as the “Gorham East West Corridor Feasibility Study”, the MTA and MaineDOT worked closely together with impacted municipalities and regional planning agencies using an open, collaborative, and comprehensive approach. This 4-year, \$ 1.1 million study was completed in September 2012 and found that the problem is real and that even with the most aggressive land-use or transit strategies – which remain important parts of the solution - additional roadway capacity was needed. That additional highway capacity could take one of two forms: widen existing roadways (Rt. 114, Rt. 22, Running Hill Road) or build a new highway.

As local communities can testify, incremental and reactive widening of existing roadways over time is not the right solution. Widening will have substantial environmental impacts on abutter, village livability, and environmental impacts and any capacity added will be consumed over time by abutting development. Local officials are looking for the sustainable mobility that is provided by new limited access highways, so that the land use around the existing roads and transit options can be planned with a more livable future in mind. In this respect, the limited access highway is the longer-term, greener solution.

And from a financial perspective, MaineDOT simply cannot afford a substantial widening project or a new connector. As the recent MaineDOT Roads Report makes clear, MaineDOT must use its traditional funding sources to maintain and preserve existing highways. They cannot afford new highways. Simply put, new highways require new funding.

Thus, much like 70 years ago, there is no viable way today for federal, state and local governments to fund a solution to this problem. To address this reality, this bill would authorize the MTA to prudently determine whether a Gorham connector – which is likely to be about 5 ½ miles long and cost up to \$150 million – can be funded by users through tolls and revenue bonding. Based upon some preliminary analysis, it appears financially viable.

But funding alone will not make a connector viable or prudent. Policymaker support will also be crucial. Happily, we are off to a great start. State policymakers originally saw the need and directed that the feasibility study be done. Impacted municipalities including Gorham, Scarborough, South Portland and Westbrook and regional planning agencies worked together for 4 years and remain supportive.

But there is certainly no guarantee that a connector will become a reality, and this bill should not be interpreted as such. It is merely the next logical step in a process that has been on-going for years. As the MTA proceeds to further analysis of various highway capacity options, stakeholders will have different perspectives, and opposition will arise. Some groups may reflexively oppose any new highway capacity, even though experience shows that investment in limited access highways provides a sustainable mobility solution in a way that can promote the livability of communities by taking regional traffic off local roads. When those debates inevitably occur, continued policymaker support may be central to whether or not a project moves forward.

This bill represents the best chance of providing a sustainable mobility solution to a chronic traffic problem. And if viable and prudent, it will be paid for by the users of the new highway, and would not siphon funds away from traditional state funding that is necessary to maintain existing highways in other parts of the state. For more information on the background and status of a connector, please see the attached 3-page document entitled “*A Turnpike Connector to Gorham: Questions and Answers*”.

Please pose any questions that I may help to answer.

## **A Turnpike Connector to Gorham: Questions and Answers**

### **Why is a Gorham connector being discussed?**

The short answer is because a new, tolled limited-access highway connector from I-95 to Gorham appears to be the best way to find a sustainable, environmentally-responsible, locally-supported and financially-viable solution to chronic traffic congestion in the region.

Daily rush hour congestion on Route 114, Route 22, and Running Hill Road is certainly among the worst in Maine. Commuter delays of 15 to 30 minutes are not uncommon. Traffic backups over a mile long occur. Simply put, these roads are heavily congested, unreliable for the movement of goods and people, and are becoming more unsafe.

This situation impacts more than commuters. Idling automobiles increase air pollution. Local businesses, local residents and the vitality of part of Maine's most prolific economic region are being held back. Municipal officials are unable to chart a livable future for these areas until this regional mobility problem is solved.

History shows what will happen if we do nothing. Over years, perhaps decades, incremental and reactive road widening projects likely will transform these roads into to 5-lane highways. Further, because road widening would not significantly limit access to abutting properties, mobility benefits will be temporary as abutting land – no longer desirable for residential or smaller-scale village businesses - is transformed by larger scale commercial development. In sum, doing nothing is a choice that leads to undesirable results.

### **What has been done to address this regional congestion problem?**

In December 2008, after decades of discussion, planning, and fundraising (including a Congressional earmark), the Maine Department of Transportation (MaineDOT) opened the Bernard P. Rines Bypass, being the 3.3-mile limited-access portion of Route 112 that runs from Route 25 to Route 114 in Gorham. The Rines Bypass achieved its purpose of alleviating congestion in Gorham center. However, the lack of a limited access connection from the Bypass to the Interstate has shifted the problem to the south, and traffic growth has made it worse.

In response to community requests, the 123rd Maine Legislature directed the Maine Turnpike Authority (MTA) and MaineDOT to conduct a study “of existing highway infrastructure and future capacity needs . . . Cumberland count[y] including the Greater Gorham . . . area.” See Resolve, 2007, Chapter 95 (LD 1720).

The MTA was the lead agency for what became known as the “Gorham East West Corridor Feasibility Study”. During this 4-year, \$ 1.1 million study, the MTA worked closely with MaineDOT, impacted municipalities (including Gorham, Scarborough, South Portland and Westbrook), and regional planning agencies, using an open, collaborative, and comprehensive

approach. The Study concluded in September 2012 with the publication of a 181 page report, which is available through the “Projects and Planning” tab at [www.maineturnpike.com](http://www.maineturnpike.com).

### **What were the findings of the latest study?**

The Study found that the problem is real and that it can be solved with a three-pronged solution.

1. **Land-use**. The study recommended that the participating municipalities explore land use strategies which “support a more efficient way for residents to travel to jobs and services”. The regional traffic problem has hampered local efforts to implement this important component of the solution.
2. **Transit**. The study suggested that state and regional entities work to assist municipalities in implementing two tiers of transit recommendations: enhancing existing services and then providing additional service to outlying areas currently without service. To be effective, the study found that there was a need for dramatic increases in capital and operational transit funding. It also found that transit strategies alone would solve only a relatively small portion of the problem.
3. **Roadway Capacity**. Finally, after consideration even the most aggressive land-use or transit strategies, the study identified the need for additional roadway capacity to improve mobility by either widening existing roadways (Rt. 114, Rt. 22, Running Hill Road) or by building a new highway.

### **Where would a Gorham connector be located?**

That question cannot be answered without much more data and analysis. In general terms, however, preliminary analysis indicates that a new highway would function best if it connected the Turnpike (I-95) at or near Exit 45 in South Portland and the southeasterly end of the Rines Bypass in Gorham, a distance of about 5 miles. Obviously, any alignment would be located to minimize abutter, environmental, community and other impacts.

### **How much would it cost?**

Again, without any alignment or design, that question is very premature. However, any Gorham connector would cost a substantial sum – perhaps up to \$150 million. By way of comparison, that is more than MaineDOT historically spends in a year on highway reconstruction on its 8,800 miles of highways statewide.

### **Why is the MTA in the best position to meet this challenge?**

MaineDOT would be the entity to widen existing state highways. As noted above, however, local municipalities are looking the sustainable mobility and village livability that is provided by new limited access highways as has been experienced in Damariscotta and Topsham. And widening is also expensive and has substantial abutter, community, and environmental impacts.

Further, MaineDOT simply cannot afford a new connector. Federal funding is relatively flat and earmarks are gone. Bonding is already being used extensively for existing bridges, roads, and multimodal infrastructure. Fuel tax increases or other significant new revenue sources remain very unlikely. The bottom line is that MaineDOT must use its traditional funding sources to maintain and preserve existing highways. They cannot afford new highways.

Simply stated, new highways require new funding. From a policy standpoint, it makes sense for a new connector to be paid for by the people who need and use it. With its planning, tolling, and bonding capabilities, that is exactly what the MTA is designed to do.

### **Will the MTA be able to build a connector?**

No one knows yet. With the support of policymakers, the MTA is poised to prudently analyze the development of a Gorham connector. Based upon some preliminary financial analysis, it appears that a toll-supported limited access highway may be financially viable and that no federal, state or local funding would be required.

But funding alone is not enough. Policymaker support is also crucial. The feasibility study process shows that we are off to a great start. State lawmakers originally saw the need and directed that the study be done. Locally, impacted municipalities including Gorham, Scarborough, South Portland and Westbrook entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) indicating conceptual support and their collective willingness to engage.

As we proceed to the analysis of various highway capacity options, stakeholders will have some different perspectives, and opposition will inevitably and appropriately arise. When it does, continued policymaker support may be central to whether or not a project moves forward.

### **What are the next steps?**

The MTA has asked the federal Army Corps of Engineers to refine the project purpose and need statement so that stakeholders and regulators all know what we are trying to do and why.

Impacted municipalities and regional and state transportation planning agencies will be asked to reaffirm their support for a connector through a Memorandum of Understanding.

The 128<sup>th</sup> Maine Legislature will be considering legislation this spring that will give the MTA the explicit authority to analyze and potentially develop a Gorham connector.

With this support, the MTA will thoughtfully engage stakeholders and regulators and prudently seek a financially viable and sustainable solution to this chronic regional mobility challenge.