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Ellen C. Bickmore

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Commentary

Views on widening the Maine Turnpike

Safety and economics: Key reasons for widening the turnpike

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by Ellen C. Bickmore

Maine's economic health and the safety of the state's motorists will converge at a critical crossroads this November as voters again consider whether to widen the southern portion of the Maine Turnpike. Maine grocers view this not so much as a crossroads, rather as a bottleneck that stretches from York to Scarborough, choking off the free flow of commerce and putting the lives of our truckers—and thousands of other travelers—at risk daily.

According to the Maine Turnpike Alternatives Study, prepared by Vanasse Hangen, Brustlin, Inc. (VHB) in association with RKG Associates, Inc., "the overall accident rate on the four-lane section is approximately 72.4 percent greater than the accident rate on the six-lane section" of the turnpike. That statistic was personified earlier this year when a driver hauling a truckload of goods destined for Shaw's supermarkets was killed by a pickup truck that jumped the median of the four-lane section and crashed head-on into his rig.

This and other turnpike-related tragedies raise several important issues, not the least of which is the functional obsolescence of a roadway designed and built a half-century ago under standards and for vehicles that are no longer applicable today. As the aforementioned accident painfully illustrated, the four-lane stretch has extremely narrow breakdown lanes and recovery zones, providing little room for error or escape should traffic conditions necessitate split-second maneuvering to avoid a collision or other road hazard. These buffer zones are unforgiving, particularly for a tractor-trailer hauling 60,000 pounds of frozen foods.

Compounding the safety problem is the fact traffic demands and travel speeds have increased geometrically since the four-lane portion of the turnpike was originally constructed. Although it's been just six years since Maine voters initially rejected widening the turnpike, today an additional 500,000 vehicles per month traverse the southern end of the turnpike compared to 1991. During the past ten years, turnpike traffic has increased by an average of nearly 5 percent per year and is projected to continue to increase at an annual rate of 2.75 percent in the years ahead. The VHB study forecasts that such a rise in turnpike traffic will cause annual commercial vehicle travel to be delayed 50,000 hours in the year 2005, increasing to nearly 62,000 hours by 2010. Since 82 percent of all freight shipped into the state—including groceries—arrives via truck, this projected congestion will have a detrimental effect on the retail industry, which ultimately will be borne by consumers in the form of higher product costs. After all, time is money.

A report released last year by The Associated General Contractors of America (AGC) said, "Our national prosperity, growth, and quality of life depend on the efficiency with which we produce, transport, and market our goods and services. Without continuous investment in infrastructure, a

modern economy fails to grow." The truth of this statement is evidenced by the fact that Japan's infrastructure investment is roughly three times that of the United States, resulting in productivity growth that also is about triple the rate of our country. Furthermore, the AGC report points out that every dollar invested in highway maintenance and modernization reduces direct operating costs by three to four dollars. The economic benefit of such prudent investment is twofold: cost savings for manufacturers, suppliers, and consumers, and increased employment opportunities for all.

Today, retail grocers account for 60,000 jobs across Maine, from the neighborhood "Mom and Pop" stores, convenience stores, and large grocery chains to the companies that sell and service the industry. All these jobs depend on the Maine Turnpike as the conduit by which retail products enter the state. It's also the route tourists use when heading to our beaches, state parks, hunting camps, and snowmobile trails. These tourists, in turn, help make up the 700,000 consumers who purchase groceries each week in Maine. They're also the ones who would pay the bulk of the turnpike-widening costs. Tolls—not taxes—are what will fund the project, with out-of-state tourists accounting for a full 55 percent of turnpike tolls.

Contrary to popular belief, widening the turnpike is not just a southern Maine issue, but of statewide importance. Broccoli and potato farmers in Aroostook County, fishermen from Lubec, and paper producers in Madawaska all depend on the turnpike to get their goods to market in Maine and the rest of the nation. Northern Maine retailers are equally reliant on the turnpike as the pipeline that enables them to get products on the shelf in a timely fashion and allows for variety in selection to drive sales and price points. Impeding the transport of goods to northern Maine could place small, independent grocers at a competitive disadvantage with larger chain stores that are able to keep stockpiles of nonperishable items on hand.

It's often been said that the turnpike is our primary artery, carrying the lifeblood of Maine's economy from New Hampshire to New Brunswick. If that's the case, then old age clearly has set in, causing the artery to become sclerotic and constricting the flow of commerce. The time has come to widen the passage and allow the economic lifeblood to flow freely once more and infuse all corners of the state with the fruits of prosperity.



Ellen C. Bickmore is executive director of the Maine Grocers Association, a nonprofit organization serving the retail industry of Maine.

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