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Everett B. Carson

Natural Resource Council of Maine

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Commentary

Views on Widening the Maine Turnpike

Widening the Maine Turnpike would invite major costs

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by Everett B. Carson

Should the Maine Turnpike be widened to three lanes between Mile 12 and Exit 6A? Widening proponents proclaim the enormous benefits of a six-lane turnpike—but at what cost to our sense of place, community character, and quality of life? Such questions raise fundamental issues about the kind of place we want Maine to be in the 21st century— now less than three years away. These issues include:

- If the turnpike is widened, how will we deal with the increased air pollution, more severe local traffic congestion, and other "quality of life" impacts upon our communities especially those in southern Maine—and across our state?
- If we continue to over invest in one particular road (the turnpike) and significantly underinvest in the rest of Maine's transportation system especially roads and bridges in rural areas—what will be the costs down the road to rehabilitate our infrastructure?
- Since November 1991—when the public overwhelmingly voted to stop the widening process and to study and give preference to alternatives to more and wider roads— have the Maine Turnpike Authority and other state transportation officials done all they can and should to avoid this costly project?
- Finally, what is our collective vision for Maine's future, and what kind of transportation system— including alternatives like passenger rail, expanded bus service, coastal ferries, and better traffic management—will best serve that future?

Let's look at these questions, beginning with the environmental and quality-of-life consequences of turnpike widening. In a study completed in late 1996 for the Turnpike Authority, their consultants predicted a doubling of the number of cars on the road in southern Maine in twenty-five years if present trends continue. The consultants acknowledged that such traffic growth will have a serious impact on air pollution in three counties that currently are out of compliance with federal air quality standards. A turnpike widening would not cause the doubling of traffic, but certainly would enable the worsening of an already serious air quality problem. Has the Turnpike Authority made plans to address this problem? Unfortunately, the answer is "no."

In addition, the congestion on some local arteries and "feeder roads" linked to the turnpike already is a serious problem. Think for a moment of the multi-mile traffic jams on Route 1 at Bath and Wiscasset on summer weekends and increasingly on weekdays, as well. While plans for a new bridge at Bath are under way, neither a widening of Route 1 or workable alternatives are being seriously contemplated at present. And if and when they are, the cost will be additional hundreds of millions of dollars.

The next issue that must be examined is the condition of roads and bridges throughout the state, and the money we are not investing in them. One-third of our roads are in fair to poor condition, according to the state Department of Transportation's own reports—and they are getting worse.

The total estimated shortfall to maintain our roads and bridges during the next twenty years is more than \$1 billion. Statewide, there are 100 bridges that need immediate replacement or major rehabilitation, according to the DOT. It would cost \$328 million to correct existing structural deficiencies in Maine's bridges—a backlog that is growing each year.

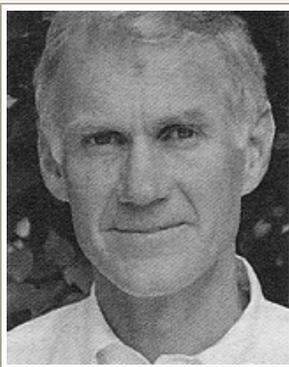
By law, the Turnpike Authority is required to turn over its surplus revenues each year to the DOT to help address the state's other serious transportation needs. Yet during the past few years, only a few million dollars have been paid annually. There has been plenty of money—an estimated \$ 150 million—for the turnpike to spend on newer and wider bridges and new interchanges, but only a paltry sum left over at the end of each year for the rest of the state. Compounding the insult, surplus revenues turned over to the DOT are eligible for a 3-to-1 federal dollar match. Turnpike expenditures, however, are not.

In 1991, voters were clear about their desire to stop the proposed widening, to get on with the business of repairing roads and bridges all across the state, and to go to work on alternatives in the turnpike corridor. Today, almost six years later, Maine people have seen delay after delay on one of the most sensible and cost-effective alternatives: electronic toll collection. We know there is congestion and serious backups at the toll-booths. Unfortunately, electronic toll collection, which should have been operational during the summer peak season, is only now being implemented, thus, denying Maine voters a chance to evaluate its real impact.

Other alternatives, including passenger rail (endorsed by the Legislature in 1991 after a successful statewide petition drive in 1990), traffic management through time-of-day pricing, and enhanced intercity bus service either have not started, been curtailed, or are being blocked by political barriers.

Interestingly, it is virtually impossible to find anyone, including highway engineering firms or DOT officials, who believe we can build our way out of congestion. Highly populated, more urban states like New Jersey and California are finding this out the hard way—by investing billions of dollars and not solving a problem. Should Maine go that route?

The answer is clearly "no." We must create an alternative vision, stick to it, and invest in it. Our state's motto, "Dirigo," should guide us as we move forward. Let us protect our quality of life, invest prudently in our existing infrastructure, then design and commit ourselves to a transportation system that will serve Maine people well into the future.



Everett B. Carson is the executive director of the Natural Resource Council of Maine and a long-time proponent of sensible transportation and land-use policy.

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