

Wiscasset's Chunnel

If the state can't bypass the traffic bottleneck in this historic village, it might just tunnel under it.

For more than forty years Maine drivers and visiting travelers have wrestled with one of the worst bottlenecks on Route 1 — the town of Wiscasset, some nine miles north of Bath. On Friday nights during the tourist season, the northbound travel lane often is packed with more than four miles of stalled cars piloted by frustrated Bath Iron Works commuters, residents trying to beat the tourists to the best restaurants, and out-of-state vacationers and cottage owners jump-starting their weekends. Over the decades highway experts have suggested a long list of ways to move traffic around, over, and through the scenic village on the western shore of the Sheepscot River. Now they're even talking about going *under* the town.

With the possible exception of Ogunquit or Camden, there is no town on Route 1 that rivals Wiscasset's traffic problems. It's the classic case of too many cars on too little road. As soon as Route 1 vaults across the Kennebec River in Bath, it undergoes a transformation so startling that the unprepared suffer culture shock. The modern four-lane, controlled-access superhighway becomes a winding, bucolic, two-lane road bordered by forests and marshes.

The narrowed roadway isn't a problem, though, until travelers approach Wiscasset. Just south of town, restaurants

and motels, shopping centers and discount stores line the highway. As Route 1 enters the village, it winds around a classic brick courthouse and white clapboard church at the top of the town green before dropping into the well-preserved early nineteenth-century downtown, with its raised sidewalks and upscale antique shops and art emporiums. Three blocks later the highway crosses the broad Sheepscot River to Edgecomb on a graceful, modern bridge.

It's a village — and a road — designed almost two centuries ago, when heavy traffic was a stagecoach and a hay wagon arguing over the right of way to the ferry landing. Today an average of 18,000 vehicles a day passes through on Route 1, with traffic peaking at 25,000 or more in summer.

So many people have talked about so many solutions in so many news articles over the past several decades that mid-coast travelers can be excused if they react with a certain cynicism to the latest round of ideas. They've heard all the talk about a bypass (to the north through Alna or to the south across Westport Island, take

your pick) and eliminating parking on Main Street and putting in traffic lights for pedestrians. Twenty years ago some local wags even suggested going over Main Street with a superbridge that would launch itself off the ridgeline next to the Lincoln County Courthouse and touch down across the Sheepscot River in Edgecomb. Residents were so desperate that the idea got serious, if brief, attention.

The latest proposal that has the town buzzing is a tunnel that would carry traffic under the downtown from the western outskirts of the village to the riverfront. It would provide a fast, intersection- and pedestrian-free shortcut directly from one side of town to the other, while travelers who want to explore Main Street's shops could continue on the current road.

At first glance the idea appears as outlandish as the superbridge, but it is actually the reincarnation of an idea that first surfaced more than two decades ago. "The bypass issue has been around for a long time, and it has always attracted a lot of opposition and controversy," points out Wiscasset architect James

Only one of the fine old homes lining Wiscasset's Main Street, the Nichols-Sortwell House, dating from 1812, might soon wake up to find Route 1 going both in front of it and under it, as the community looks for a way to alleviate its growing traffic congestion.



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Schildroth. "Way back when I first moved here in the 1970s I sort of wondered aloud what it would cost to go underground." Schildroth ran some preliminary numbers and estimated that a tunnel would cost considerably less than any of the bypass proposals then under consideration.

There the idea rested until last year, when public discussions of traffic congestion in the region revived it. Even Governor Angus King was quoted in a recent newspaper article as saying a tunnel was worth investigating. The Maine Department of Transportation (MDOT) hired Hatch Mott MacDonald, a California consulting firm that has worked on both the Big Dig in Boston and the English Channel Tunnel — the Chunnel — linking France and England, to look into the possibility of building Maine's first highway tunnel. A company engineer, Steve Taylor, visited the town in January as a first step to drawing up cost estimates.

If nothing else, the fact that MDOT commissioner John Melrose is willing to spend real dollars checking out a Chunnel for Wiscasset is a measure of both the lengths he's willing to go to find a solution and the stubborn difficulty of the problem. A tunnel looks pretty good compared to the controversy surrounding other options. The mere mention of building a Wiscasset bypass traditionally brings out opponents in droves in the midcoast region, and this time around has been no exception.

Two local referendums, one in 1990 and another last year, showed that Wiscasset residents favor a bypass by an overwhelming margin, explains first selectman Benjamin Rines, Jr., whose history as both a town official and Route 1 commuter goes back to the late 1970s. Rines admits liking the idea of a bypass himself, reasoning that it would bring back the downtown as a village center rather than a tourist stop.

But even Rines recognizes that the downtown isn't what it was even ten years ago. "We've lost the supermarket, the hardware store, the newsstand. They've all moved out to the highway south of town and been replaced with antique shops and touristy stores," he points out. "I do most of my shopping in Wiscasset, but I don't do any of it downtown."

Those changes mean a bypass would have far more economic effect today than a decade or two ago. Downtown Wiscasset could have survived a bypass then, Rines says. A more tourist-dependent one might not do so well today.

And support for a bypass at the ballot box consistently has been countered by vociferous and well organized opposition from an odd-couple coalition of downtown business people and environmental activists who have opposed any proposal that would detour traffic away from Wiscasset and through the pristine back-country of neighboring towns such as Woolwich, Dredsen, Alna, and Newcastle. Main Street businesses claim they need the Route 1 traffic passing in front of their doors, and rural residents want nothing to do with any project that would put a major highway through their backyards.

Last year word began spreading that Wiscasset traffic congestion was once again on MDOT's front burner following the construction of the new Sagadahoc Bridge over the Kennebec River at Bath. Residents found an MDOT-sponsored "Wiscasset Bypass" website on the internet. Rumors and then maps circulated about two potential routes around the bottleneck, one running north of Wiscasset and across the Sheepscot to Alna and the other sweeping south of town through Westport, a tiny town on an island ten miles long and one mile wide accessed by a bridge bare-

ly a stone's throw from the site of the former Maine Yankee atomic power plant.

Almost immediately three local groups rose to oppose any major new road construction and to advocate for a regional approach to the problems of traffic and growth. Westport-based Friends of Coastal Preservation and the

*The idea of a
tunnel under
Wiscasset looks
more attractive
every day.*

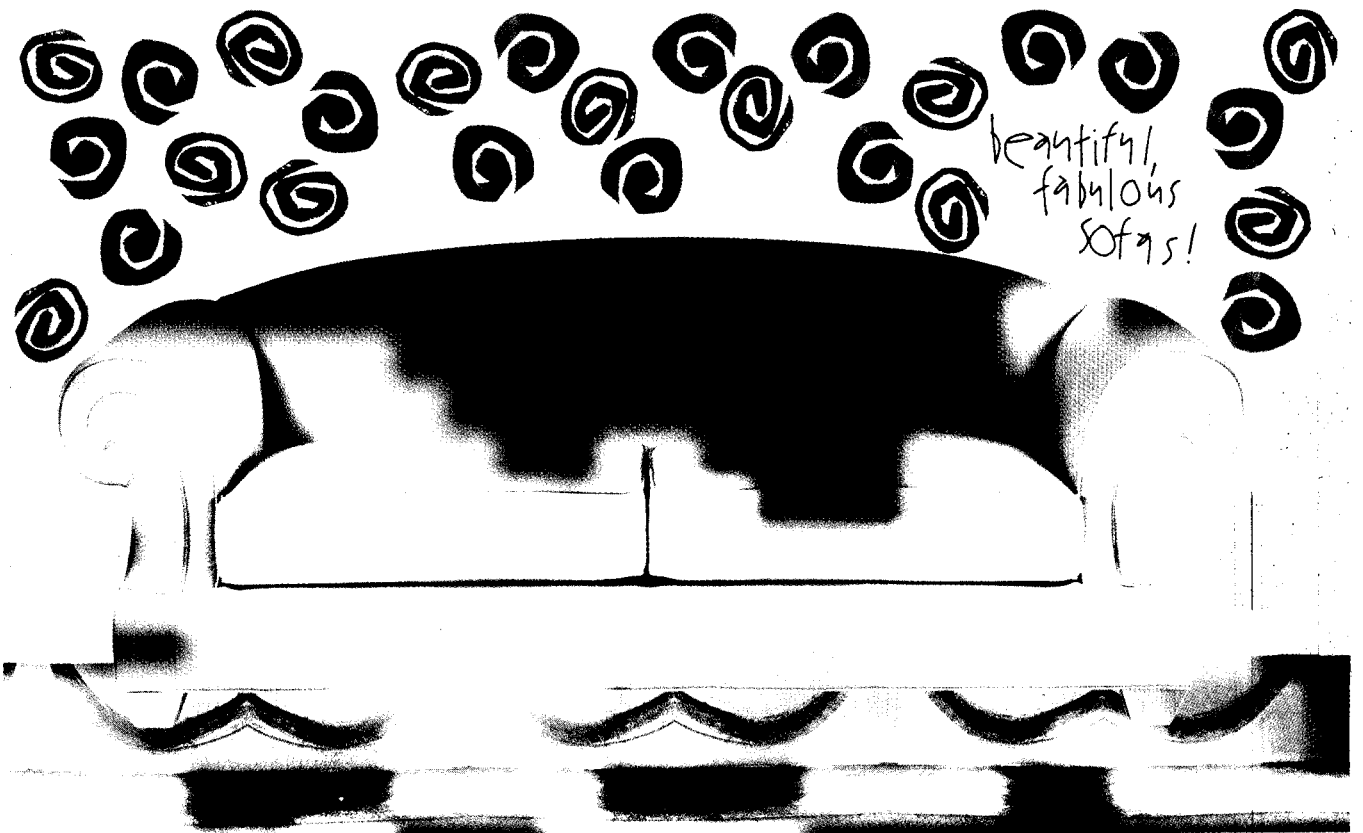
Alna-based North Says No, made up mostly of Sheepscot Valley Conservation Association members, brought together residents from Woolwich to Newcastle who disagree with the idea of a bypass. Meanwhile the Midcoast Alliance for Planning, drawing from conservation groups and land trusts from Belfast to Brunswick, insisted the state take a more comprehensive approach to planning and growth in the area.

"We are not antigrowth or antidevelopment," emphasizes Norma Dreyfus, of

Westport, a leader of Friends of Coastal Preservation, "but the MDOT seems to be approaching the entire issue of Route 1 improvements in the midcoast in a piecemeal fashion — a bridge in Bath, a widening project in Warren, a bypass in Wiscasset. This region needs a comprehensive approach to its transportation problems, one that looks at the overall needs and the overall effects."

"There's no question we have a problem," says Michael Herz, of the Sheepscot Valley Conservation Association. "There is also no question that there are a whole list of actions that can be taken before we need to think about putting in a bypass, such as new traffic lights, a pedestrian underpass on Main Street, the renovation of the rail line between Brunswick and Rockland, and new signage on Interstate 95. If they don't alleviate the problem, then we move on to talk about new construction options."

Another wild card in the deck is the potential effect of Augusta's third bridge across the Kennebec, due for completion in about four years. It will offer a direct link from I-95 to Route 3 and the coast, possibly siphoning off a significant amount of Wiscasset's tourist traffic.



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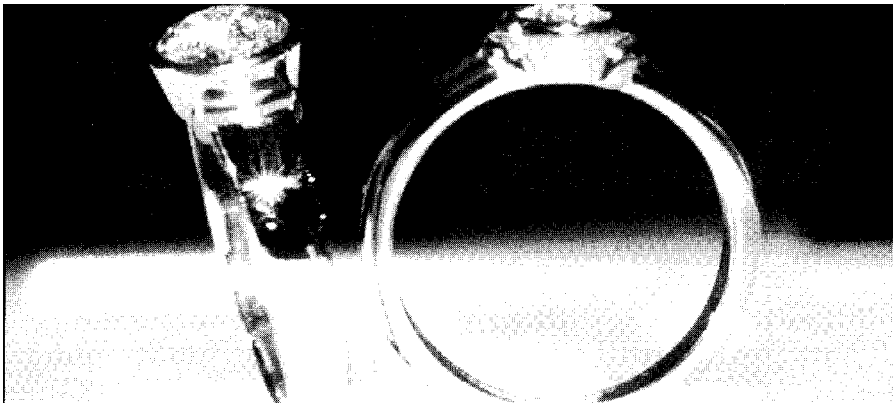
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ACCORDING to Melrose and Edward Hanscom, the head of the MDOT's transportation analysis section, the midcoast project has been bubbling for years. "Ten years ago we started a major study to look at the whole midcoast area," Hanscom explains. "It was completed in 1995. We knew then that widening Route 1 or building a new corridor would be difficult, so we looked at other ways to increase capacity, such as access management and alternative transportation modes."

Another study in 1996-1997 concluded that, even after implementing all conceivable options, "we ought to look more closely at the feasibility of new capacity," meaning new road construction, Hanscom allows. "Without that, we'll still be looking at major problems in the future."

Hanscom and Melrose both decline to estimate the costs for either of the two bypass proposals, although recently numbers as high as \$100 million have been kicked around the debate. Both options require miles of new highway, at a cost of more than \$1 million a mile just to build a two-lane road, exclusive of right-of-way acquisition or bridges.

"If there are easier, less expensive things to do, we certainly want to do them," Hanscom adds. "But we have to look at the long term as well as the short term."

Melrose points out that the MDOT is investing \$30 million to rejuvenate the Brunswick-Rockland rail line through Wiscasset, offering the possibility of commuter service for employees of Bath Iron Works, MBNA, and other companies along the coast, as well as tourists coming into Rockland by ferry and visiting the Boothbay peninsula. Even he seems to recognize the political difficulty of getting a bypass built around Wiscasset, and he is now proposing that the department buy the land for a bypass and bank it for possible future use to give other options a chance to work.

All of which makes the idea of a tunnel under Wiscasset more attractive every day. Architect Schildroth has spoken with engineers who tell him that, as a rule of thumb, a tunnel would cost about the same as a bridge across the Sheepscot. "I'm not trying to promote the idea one way or another," he cautions. "The merits of a good idea should be self-evident, and this requires a lot more investigation and study. But it might let Wiscasset return to being a very civil, attractive place again." —Jeff Clark