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JAVIER A. COLE
COMMISSIONER

November 9, 2010

Mr. Morrison Bonpasse, Co-Chair & Mr. Frank Risell, Co-Chair
R.O.A.D.
P.O. Box 390
Newcastle, Maine 04553

Re: Response to October 06, 2010 Letter regarding Wiscasset Route 1 Corridor Study

Dear Mr. Bonpasse:

Commissioner Cole has asked that I respond to your October 6 letter regarding the Wiscasset Route 1 Corridor Study. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has issued its determination of the Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative (LEDPA). The LEDPA, the alternative that can most likely receive environmental permits for construction, is the N2a/N8c alternative identified in the October 2007 Draft Environmental Impacts Report, as modified through a series of public meetings held with the Midcoast Bypass Task Force. We are now in the process of identifying mitigation measures to account for those environmental impacts that cannot be avoided, to be followed by the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS). Unless we encounter new information, we expect the FEIS will be published early next year.

In response to your three points, I feel confident that MaineDOT has addressed the requirements of Maine's Sensible Transportation Policy Act. The Department has evaluated dozens of alternatives, including "no-build" options that tried to improve congestion occurring in Wiscasset Village and will continue to identify and evaluate all potentially feasible alternatives to minimize traffic congestion until such time as the bypass can be funded.

Please allow me to respond to your three points with more detail:

1. *"Building a bypass without further consideration of improving the route in downtown Wiscasset would violate the Maine Sensible Transportation Policy Act and the bypass would not be the Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative."*

Early and throughout the Study process, we evaluated alternative modes of transportation and other strategies in keeping with Maine's Sensible Transportation Policy Act. We considered and even tested the effectiveness of several non-bypass alternatives, ranging from installing traffic signals to modifying parking arrangements, etc. all of which has been documented. In the end, we chose not to further pursue options that would detrimentally affect:



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- The economic or cultural aspects of the downtown area of Wiscasset; our premise was to assure continued pedestrian access in and through the downtown.
- Historic District in Wiscasset. Federal funds may not be used in ways that cause an adverse effect on historic properties or areas unless all other feasible or practicable options are unavailable. A pedestrian overpass and tunnel were evaluated and in the judgment of the State Historic Preservation Officer, were found to be unacceptable options. Because such facilities must also meet the Americans with Disabilities Act, a substantial ramp system would have been needed for either above or below ground options meaning that pedestrians wanting to cross the street would find themselves walking longer distances to get to their destinations and would likely opt to stay on the surface. Both such facilities would require local maintenance and security. Additional reasons for dismissing those options included cost, risk of damaging historic structures during construction, the need for relocating underground utilities and difficulty in dealing with surface runoff.

Municipalities that are host to significant transportation investments are often temporarily affected from a tax revenue perspective. Economic analyses of similar situations in other areas show that property values often increase and other new activities are generated when large transportation projects are undertaken.

“Interim” steps have received full consideration. The Travel Advisory System installed in 2009 will continue to operate until such time as long-term traffic congestion has been eliminated or a better system can be devised and deployed.

Several alternatives for a vehicular tunnel were identified but all were deemed to be economically infeasible, and all would cause significant long-term traffic disruption to Route 1 and pose threats to the stone foundations of the buildings within the historic district.

The congestion standard used in the Wiscasset Route 1 Corridor Study is based on Levels of Service and the elimination of traffic congestion along Route 1 in Wiscasset. The Department evaluated alternative modes of transportation and transportation systems and travel demand management approaches. It was found none of these approaches would reduce traffic congestion to an acceptable Level of Service.

MaineDOT has no jurisdiction over land use – that is purely a local determination. While Red’s Eats may contribute to traffic congestion, it is not the only reason that people cross Route 1 in Wiscasset Village and its relocation alone would not solve the traffic problem in downtown Wiscasset. This is a vibrant downtown with many pedestrians crossing the street from one shop to another. Many people consider this to be the essence of what a downtown should be and want to preserve the “people scale” that exists today in lieu of allowing vehicles to simply “pass through” the Village. The Town has developed a plan for at least 36 parking spaces at the end of Railroad Avenue – this could help address the need for same-side parking facilities to accommodate Red’s Eats.

The Connector Road being proposed between Route 27 and Route 218 in Wiscasset will serve two purposes. First and foremost, it will allow the efficient movement of trucks and other traffic seeking to travel south along Route 1 from Route 218 and vice versa to do so without having to travel along Federal Street and the Village portion of Route 1. That will help alleviate some of the traffic congestion. It will also allow for construction of a full service interchange in Wiscasset. Hooper Street, the West Alna Road and the Fowle Hill Road do not provide for safe and efficient large truck movements.

As stated previously, MaineDOT did consider and included realistic traffic reductions that could occur due to transit (bus and passenger rail) services. This was integral to the development of future traffic volumes.

MaineDOT concluded that alternatives evaluated would not solve the congestion problem and the state and federal resource agencies agreed. All known reasonable alternatives were considered. We agree that for the most part today, traffic congestion is primarily a summer and shoulder season phenomenon. However, the congestion results in economic losses to the immediate area and to the region as a whole, because trucks and other commerce cannot flow efficiently. We have already seen that congestion occurs nearly every day northbound and/or southbound from the Traveler Information System, and we expect it will get worse over time.

2. *"What's needed is further study and analysis of the costs and benefits of improving the route, and comparison to the bypass proposal."*

The Wiscasset Route 1 Corridor Study is the culmination of many years of studies. The current study itself has been in process for over 12 years. During this extensive time frame, numerous strategies have been considered and dismissed for various reasons. We do not believe we have left any stones unturned that would change the ultimate conclusion that has been reached – a bypass is needed to address traffic congestion, which will only get worse over time. All of our analyses have included transit and even passenger rail, but these alternative modes of transportation alone are not enough to reduce traffic flows to acceptable levels. Similarly, various vehicular and pedestrian traffic control mechanisms cannot achieve the needed relief to allow commerce to flow through the area at an acceptable level.

Our understanding of your Route 1 Improvements scenarios consist of a short and a longer tunnel alternative, a pedestrian bridge or tunnel, a railroad overpass, a police traffic control person, left turn restrictions, reduced or eliminated Route 1 parking, relocating Red's Eats, geometric improvements to Route 1 or increasing speed limits in the Village District. We have already looked at the tunnel concept and found it to not be feasible, due to elevation and ramp needs, the need to relocate existing utilities under Route 1 and significant risk for damaging the old foundations of the buildings located along Route 1 in the Village Historic District. We tried traffic control with a uniformed officer, prohibiting left turn lanes and reduced parking. None of these were shown to substantially reduce traffic congestion. We

could potentially support the Town of Wiscasset in its development of an intermodal facility, presumably located at Railroad Avenue, if the Town develops a master plan and shows economic justification for its development.

You suggest that the state should identify and implement by cost various levels of improvements that could be made and their relative effects. With this approach, we could potentially invest cumulatively over time only to be faced with the continued need of an altogether different transportation improvement in the future. The initial capital expenditures would have been wasted. In our analyses, we have strived to identify the least-cost approach that will meet the future traffic needs.

The Department has already fully deployed the Traveler Information System. We coordinate with the Wiscasset Police Department on known upcoming events, such as the July 4 parade and the Oxfest music festival that was held on the weekend of July 31 this year. We routinely post notices of major traffic accidents and incidents when we are alerted by police as well. We continue to monitor other opportunities to improve incident management to alleviate traffic congestion in Wiscasset, as it will be many more years before the bypass can be constructed.

3. *"Additional interim steps are needed and would be cost effective to reduce congestion during the years before Route 1 is improved or a bypass is built."*

We will continue to explore all potentially promising Intelligent Transportation Systems to reduce traffic congestion in Wiscasset. As you indicate, we are looking into ways to predict when traffic congestion will occur so we can activate the 5-1-1 traveler information system and the I-295 Variable Message Sign sooner to better reflect travel conditions in Wiscasset, recognizing it takes about 30 minutes to reach Wiscasset Village from the I-295 sign location. We agree the sign could be turned on earlier, but not later, as the traffic has cleared by the time the I-295 sign is turned off.

We will consider your request to install an additional permanent traffic counter at Davey Bridge and on Route 27 in Wiscasset. However, we believe the permanent traffic counter installation near Wiscasset Ford and another permanent counter located in Newcastle are sufficient to meet our traffic data collection and analysis needs.

We are currently looking into ways to calculate travel time through Wiscasset. If we can develop a reliable travel time monitor at reasonable cost and with low operations and maintenance needs, we will certainly consider implementing such a system in Wiscasset. In addition to the vendor website you provided, we are also considering the use of non-intrusive data from vehicle transponders and Google software technology to provide travel time.

We would also again consider offering to the Town of Wiscasset partial funding and monitoring for one season for a traffic control officer to manage pedestrian crossings in Wiscasset Village.

In closing, I want to again thank you for your innovative thinking. While we believe we have more than adequately considered such alternatives as tunnels and pedestrian crossings, we will continue to explore and implement when feasible all interim measures that could reasonably be expected to reduce traffic congestion in Wiscasset Village. Please feel free to contact me at 624-3315 for further information on these and other potential improvements.

Sincerely,



Gerry Audibert, P.E.
Study Manager

DAC/GA/jmf

cc w/Enc: Commissioner Cole
Kat Beaudoin
Jay Clement, US Army Corps of Engineers
Town of Wiscasset Selectboard
Town of Wiscasset Transportation Committee

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