

## **Testimony of Mainers for Smarter Transportation in Support of LD 1020: A Bill to Repeal the Laws Providing for the Construction of a Connector to Gorham**

Senator Nangle, Representative Crafts, and Members of the Joint Select Committee on Transportation, my name is Myles Smith, I am from Portland, and I am here today along with other Mainers for Smarter Transportation, an all-volunteer group, and the 12,500 signatories of our petition to cancel the \$331 million boondoggle highway proposal marketed as the Gorham Connector. We've provided a digital copy of the 511 pages of petition signatories, many from your districts, as well as a report detailing the many cheaper, faster, less risky and less destructive alternatives to an elevated tolled 4 to 6 lane highway which have been discarded in favor of this risky, expensive, impractical, unpopular, polluting, and at this point highly unlikely to be built turnpike.

There are so many reasons that opposition to this highway proposal erupted up after the plan and route were announced a year ago. While we could speak at length or answer questions about any of these points, I'll be brief here. All of these points are referenced in a digital version of our testimony, which I'll also provide.

### **Why should this legislature pass this bill now?**

1. **The highway is opposed by the public and has no path forward.** The MTA contracted and then withheld the results of an opinion poll from last summer showing only 40% of local residents support the project, with 45% opposed. Scarborough unanimously endorsed the planning agreement with the MTA, then voted 6-1 against the project once they saw its proposed route, ballooning costs, negative impacts and scant benefits. Westbrook also flipped unanimously to reject the proposal last month. There is no highway route west of Portland that would not traverse these towns. And, we already mentioned the 12,500 folks from all over Maine, including from each of your districts, calling for an end to this proposal. [Source: MTA via PPH FOAA request]
2. **The highway will raise costs for all Mainers:** Contrary to the MTA's initial claims, this highway is too expensive to be self-financed by its toll payers, and must be subsidized by everyone who uses I-95, and thus everyone who buys and sells goods that come in from out of state. That's all of us. A bond rating agency reviewed the MTA's books and estimated the MTA would have to raise tolls by 29% on I-95 drivers in the next few years to pay for their unnecessary expansion. When the MTA makes a mistake, all Mainers pay. By doing nothing, this legislature is approving that 29% toll hike. [Source: Fitch Bond Ratings Agency, 2022]
3. **The cost estimate has more than doubled since 2017, and is probably much higher:** The \$331 million figure is from 2023, though the MTA and its in-house consultants HNTB misled the public by claiming a much lower figure of "somewhere north of \$200 million" or "maybe \$250 million" when the project was rolled out in 2024. The MTA and HNTB will participate in the next study to determine whether a highway is necessary, another waste of time and money. Meanwhile, we have a \$300 million deficit in the highway fund to maintain the roads we already have. We need a comprehensive rethink of how we approach transportation in this state, and that can only start by cancelling this project. [Source: HNTB]
4. **The proposed highway would not actually "solve" local congestion:** The MTA promised a panacea and delivered a bill of goods. Their own report found the highway would only save area residents an average of 4 minutes per rush-hour commute. For decades, we've been promised that more highways will solve congestion, but there's no evidence for this. This report by Transportation for America found that from 1993 to 2017, the largest 100 US metro areas

increased highway lane miles by 42%, while their population grew by only 32%, yet congestion delays in those same cities increased by 144%. Clearly, it's time to abandon this failed strategy, and this bill gives us the opportunity we need to start over.

5. **Trust with the community has been so broken, there's no new study of highway feasibility that will fix it.** The 2012 study that supposedly justified a highway through this region was led by HNTB, the MTA's highway engineering consultants for the last seven decades. HNTB has a financial incentive in recommending a highway, as does MTA, which has perpetuated its existence long past the initial intent of the organization by taking on more ever more debt. In pushing their plan, the MTA and HNTB have at various points knowingly understated the estimated cost, overstated the traffic counts on local roads, retracted a claimed 2023 traffic study that was never actually conducted, contracted and then withheld the results of an opinion poll showing low support for the project, and withheld the likely eligibility for protected historic status of Smiling Hill Farm from its owners. These communities need a trust-building gesture that is more than just a press release and a new study of tired old ideas. [Sources: MTA, via PPH FOAA]
6. **There is no other viable route for a highway through these neighborhoods.** Shifting north would put the highway through a retired landfill. Shifting south would require bulldozing far more homes. One is technically impossible and the other is far more expensive. [Source: Former MTA director Peter Mills] Burying a brook trout habitat and converting Smiling Hill Farm's pastures into an interchange is the best the MTA can do, and it's not going to cut it. More studies will waste more time and money which should go to improving the area's roads.
7. **This proposal is big government on auto-pilot.** Despite it clearly being a loser, it just won't die. Ultimately, the more residents learn about this project, the more clearly they see it as incompatible with both local values and common sense. Just because we spent too much time and money planning it, does not mean we should keep sending good money after bad. If it does not die here, a highway would face steep legal challenges over the historic preservation of Smiling Hill Farm, the environmental preservation of Red Brook, and the incredibly flawed data and process underpinning it. It will take a decade to litigate and millions more in taxpayer funds spent on flawed studies, redesigns, lawsuits, and campaigns. If we do nothing, we leave homeowners and farmers in the bulldozers' path in legal limbo for years, unable to get home improvement loans or even sell their properties for a fair price. All the while nothing will be done on the existing roads, which could greatly improve the status quo in months, not decades. It's time to move on, and only this legislature can make that happen. [Source: Portland Press Herald]
8. **Nothing in this bill prevents the MTA or DOT from coming back to this committee to authorize a financially viable and publicly-supported project when they have one.** There is no such highway proposal now, so keeping this authorization in the law conflicts with both the stated intent of the Maine DOT's planned broad reassessment, and with the values and expectations of the neighbors, town councils, etc. We look forward to a collaborative effort with the DOT, PACTS, GPCOG, the town councils and staff, to find alternatives that we are confident will make a huge improvement for far less money, in less time, and at lower risk to our communities and budgets. But that only begins with a gesture of good will.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue of statewide importance. I and others from our group would be available to answer any questions now or during the work session.

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