

## **Testimony of Mainers for Smarter Transportation in Support of LD 1756**

Senator Nangle, Representative Crafts, and Members of the Joint Select Committee on Transportation, my name is Myles Smith, I am from Portland, and I submit this testimony on behalf of the volunteer initiative Mainers for Smarter Transportation.

As you know, our group was created to oppose the Gorham Connector. We support this bill, LD 1756, because if Maine had a Smart Scale system like Virginia's, projects with such huge costs and minimal benefits would be vetted and considered in a transparent and predictable way. We are very confident the \$331 million 5-mile highway, which with interest, operations, maintenance will cost \$890 million over 30 years, would score poorly, and we could move on.

How does it stack up against the many hundreds of potholed roads in your districts, or fixes to your main street that would spur better business performance and more tax revenue? We could compare the highway to alternatives that the MTA submitted to the Army Corps which would cost hundreds of millions less for only a 1-3 minute difference in commute times. How did the highway survive this long?

Instead, here we are. Without action by this legislature on LD 1020, the fate of this dog of a highway idea will be decided on another \$275,000 traffic study. Past traffic forecasts have been about as reliable as earthquake forecasts.

Another example: last month, the GPCOG/PACTS Regional Transportation Advisory Committee recommended three projects from the DOT regional plan, including that study and \$6.2 million to repave I-195 in Saco. There are some cracks on I-195, but what there are not, is cars. It's about as busy as a suburban two-lane road, and probably still in better condition. Our understanding is that DOT objected and the Committee recommendation was overruled. The video hasn't been released yet, so we're just hearing second hand and reading the minutes.

We need a community-centered process that determines what these communities actually want, and then build projects that merge local priorities with state funding priorities.

Folks, we can do better than this. No more politics, no personalities, no biases, no mysteries. No more pet projects that never die. The DOT and MTA insist that politicians should not get involved in project selection or setting toll rates. But the alternative to inefficient decisions by politicians should not be arbitrary and opaque decisions made by bureaucracies. We have huge funding problems in our transportation sector. We have to make every dollar count.

Check out Virginia's clear and transparent website, featuring all kinds of approved projects, urban and rural, across the whole state - <http://smartscale.virginia.gov>.

We came to this situation as concerned citizens and neighbors. We got way more into the weeds of the MTA's structure and processes than we ever intended. We met with staff, went to Board meetings, and reviewed financial statements. In his confirmation hearing a few weeks ago, the new Director, Mr. Briere, noted how the MTA is the envy of the toll highway world. This was striking to us.

There is no state in the nation more dependent on a single road than we are on the Turnpike and the Authority that governs it. It has a virtual monopoly on inter-state commerce and travel. This, to us, is a reason to look more closely at how it uses the incredible power it has, which is currently overseen by a board of mostly volunteers.

After paying for all staff, operations, maintenance, debt, and making required deposits into its reserves, the MTA will make a \$52 million profit in 2025, or about a 33% margin.

We looked at neighboring New Hampshire, which has the same number of lane miles as the Maine Turnpike and far more traffic but manages to run with about half the toll revenue and even lower operating costs. If the Maine Turnpike were run as efficiently as the New Hampshire turnpike system, the MTA's costs would be far lower, and at current toll rates its profit margin would balloon to \$118 million in 2025 alone! (Source: Bank of America financial analysis)

The MTA may invest those profits in our state's highest priority projects. But, they are currently under no obligation to do so. Their obligation, they will tell us, is to bond holders, who are interested in ever-increasing traffic on the Turnpike. The MTA runs like a business, and treats increasing traffic on the Turnpike as an unqualified good thing. More traffic, more tolls, more Turnpike. More freight trucks on the Turnpike instead of freight rail and shipping? Good thing. More Mainers driving to shop in no sales tax New Hampshire? Good thing.

Then we learned about the huge funding gap in our Highway Fund. I was here a few weeks ago when the DOT Commissioner had a matter of a multi-use trail before him that would cost \$10 million dollars, about \$1 million per mile, and proponents said the project would generate tens of millions more dollars in economic and health benefits.

The Commissioner said "I support this bill, but I don't know where you're going to find the money." Well, it seems to us that all the money is in the MTA.

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