

Testimony of Maria R. Fuentes, Maine Better Transportation Association

In Support of

LD 607 – Resolve, To Direct the Department of Transportation to Examine the Possibility of Extending Interstate 95 to St. John Valley

Joint Standing Committee on Transportation

March 15, 2023

Senator Chipman, Representative Williams and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation: My name is Maria Fuentes, and I am testifying today in support of LD 607 on behalf of Maine Better Transportation Association (MBTA). MBTA is a statewide coalition made up of members who plan, design, build, maintain, operate, and use Maine’s transportation infrastructure network. Members include design engineers, transportation contractors and equipment dealers, airports, shippers, marine and bus companies, public works officials and others committed to our mission of advocating for long-term funding for the state’s transportation network to improve the quality of life and enhance the economy for Maine people.

We support LD 607 because it addresses a critical transportation corridor that was promised decades ago to the citizens, municipalities and businesses in Aroostook County - and has been since abandoned. As a result, that critical part of Maine has been deprived of the potential for economic development that other regions in Maine have enjoyed, along with the mobility enhancements that would come with completing the interstate.

A four-lane interstate connecting Aroostook County to southern and coastal Maine and Canada has been a topic of conversation for more than 75 years — since the original legislation forming the Maine Turnpike Authority passed in 1941. That bill called for an independent state agency to construct and operate a Turnpike "from some point at or near Kittery to a point at or near Fort Kent." When the federal government approved the Interstate Highway Act in 1956, plans to continue a four-lane toll highway were shelved, in effect cutting off northern Maine from the rest of the state.

Completing the expansion to Aroostook County would provide economic activity to the region and communities which would enhance livability by making the area more easily accessible to people and to freight. Moving products is critical to the natural-resourced based industries which are the backbone of that region of Maine, including agriculture and the woods products industry.

A study would help determine how the area’s transportation infrastructure deficiencies are inhibiting economic development in Maine. The extension of the highway and potential for bringing additional jobs to the region would provide not only economic opportunities for local people, but also mobility opportunities. Younger people are discovering northern Maine and Aroostook has attracted remote workers who enhance the community in many ways in addition to paying taxes. I believe many others would come because it could open the region up to new residents, and new Mainers who are looking for a beautiful and safe place to work and raise families, while also enjoy the amazing outdoor recreational opportunities available in the “Crown of Maine.”

While many improvements have been made over the years with constrained resources, more needs to be done. We are very grateful that Senator Susan Collins was able to secure funding for significant investments in Presque Isle and Caribou, not to mention the transformative initiative she led to increase truck weights to 100,000 pounds on the interstate. Now the timing is right to perform a feasibility study and eventually provide the connectivity, access and economic vitality that a highway would create, particularly in our modern global economy.

We hope the Committee will support LD 607 with a unanimous ought-to-pass vote. Thank you for considering the MBTA’s testimony and for your distinguished service to the State of Maine.