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STATE OF MAINE
DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
16 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0016

Janet T. Mills
GOVERNOR

Bruce A. Van Note
COMMISSIONER

January 8, 2023

The Honorable Benjamin M. Chipman, Senate Chair
The Honorable Lydia V. Crafts, House Chair
Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

RE: Report Back on Northern Maine Transportation Strategies

Senator Chipman, Representative Crafts, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation;

Pursuant to Resolve 2023, Chapter 63 - *Resolve, to Direct the Department of Transportation to Examine Improving Highway Connections from Interstate 95 to the St. John Valley* (formerly LD 607 – copy attached as Appendix A), the Maine Legislature directed the Maine Department of Transportation (MaineDOT) to convene and staff an advisory stakeholder group to assist the department in identifying and developing strategies to address highway mobility and transportation needs in northern Maine. The Aroostook County Advisory Stakeholder Group (Advisory Group) was comprised of eleven members and met four times, including three in-person meetings held in Aroostook County. The report of the Advisory Group to MaineDOT setting forth a summary of the process, discussions, and its advisory findings and recommendations dated December 22, 2023 is attached as Appendix B.

This letter including supporting appendices constitutes the report back to this Committee from MaineDOT required by this Resolve.¹ This letter sets forth MaineDOT's key findings and improvement strategies that it intends to pursue to address highway mobility and transportation needs in Northern Maine. MaineDOT's findings and strategies align well with the vast majority of input received from the Advisory Group. The advisory stakeholder process was collaborative, respectful, and productive. I want to thank all Advisory Group members and the public for their time, dedication, and advice. MaineDOT, the strategies below, and the special place that is The County are better due to their efforts.

¹ The Resolve called for a report back on December 31, 2023. The Senate Chair granted a MaineDOT request to extend the deadline to January 8, 2024 due to the need for MaineDOT senior staff to focus on repairing extensive highway damage in western Maine caused by the flooding in late December. Those repair efforts continue.

Key Findings

Consistent with the bulk of findings of the Advisory Group, MaineDOT makes the following factual findings that are relevant to the subsequent transportation improvement strategies:

1. Aroostook County is by far the largest of Maine's 16 counties as measured by land area, making up 19 percent of the state. The County has nearly five percent of the state's population.
2. Accordingly, there is a considerable amount of transportation infrastructure needed to keep the people of The County connected. Aroostook County contains about 12 percent of state highway and bridge infrastructure in Maine, on which about five percent of total vehicle-miles traveled in Maine occurs.
3. Highway mobility needs in Aroostook County have been studied extensively over the years. Prior to the effort created by this Resolve, the last major planning effort was the 14-year Aroostook County Transportation Study (ACTS) that concluded in 2013.
4. The major improvements that would have the most tangible benefits that were identified for construction as a result of the ACTS were bypasses around Presque Isle and Caribou and the reconstruction of a portion of Route 161. The purposes of the bypasses were to improve connectivity, improve safety, reduce traffic – especially commercial truck traffic – in downtowns, and reduce overall travel times.
5. All other new capacity improvements that were considered in the early stages of the ACTS were not recommended to be carried forward by MaineDOT or the ACTS public advisory committee. Projects not carried forward included the potential extension of I-95 and other bypasses around communities such as Bridgewater and Mars Hill. MaineDOT has never worked to advance these new alignment projects. However, they were never officially terminated. Instead, decision making was “deferred for an unspecified amount of time.”
6. The Caribou Bypass was planned to achieve the removal of an estimated 3,000 vehicles daily – including more than 280 commercial trucks – from downtown Caribou and a time savings of two minutes. The Caribou Bypass called for in the ACTS was completed in 2012 at a total cost of \$28 million.
7. The Presque Isle Bypass was planned to achieve the removal of almost 4,100 vehicles – including 544 commercial trucks – from downtown Presque Isle and time savings of almost six minutes. The middle segment of the Presque Isle Bypass was completed in 2019 at a total cost of \$15.5 million. The upcoming construction of the southerly segment of the Presque Isle Bypass was made possible by the award of a federal discretionary Infrastructure for Rebuilding America (INFRA) grant secured in 2022 from the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Acts passed in November of 2021 (IIJA), often referred to as the

Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL). This southerly segment is slated to be advertised for construction bids in 2025 and is estimated to have a total overall cost of \$85 million.

MaineDOT believes that the bulk of the benefits of the Presque Isle Bypass will be realized by the southerly two segments. The northerly segment, which will be the most expensive, will be further evaluated after the southerly segment is constructed, but based on current conditions, construction of this segment is unlikely to move forward.

8. The northerly terminus of federal Interstate 95 has always been the Canadian border in Houlton. Prior to the existence of the federal interstate system, the original enabling act for the Maine Turnpike Authority (MTA) in 1941 authorized a divided toll highway from Kittery to Fort Kent (see Private and Special Laws, Chapter 69, *An Act Create the Maine Turnpike Authority*). This likely accounts for the belief held by many that I-95 was planned to extend to the St. John Valley. In 1981, the MTA's enabling act was amended to define the northern terminus of the Turnpike as Augusta (see PL 1981, chapter 595). As was recognized in 1981, and is true today, a toll-supported highway is impractical in central and northern Maine due to low traffic volumes and the very high toll rates that would be necessary to build, operate, and maintain such a facility.
9. By all practical measures, including MaineDOT's Customer Service Levels for congestion, there is no significant congestion in most rural parts of Maine, including Aroostook County.

MaineDOT's Four Transportation Improvement Strategies

In accordance with the findings above and the input from the Advisory Group, MaineDOT's overall approach to improving highway mobility and transportation in Northern Maine has four principal components.

First, we will complete major projects already programmed. These include the completion of the \$99-million International Bridge in Madawaska, scheduled to open this spring; construction of the \$85 million (total project cost) southerly segment of the Presque Isle Bypass, scheduled to start in 2025; and numerous projects on Routes 1, 11 and 161 – priority highway corridors identified by MaineDOT and the Advisory Group.

Second, on a parallel track, we will conduct new Corridor Management Plans for portions of Routes 1, 11, and 161 to determine what additional measures – over and above work already scheduled – are needed to enhance safety and mobility. These new systematic and high-level planning efforts will seek to address needs through maintenance efforts or through scoped capital projects that can be feasibly funded.

Third, we will continue to work with municipalities to seek potentially transformational improvements to village and downtowns area in The County, including ongoing or planned collaborations like those currently underway in Presque Isle, Caribou, Van Buren, Madawaska, and Fort Kent.

Lastly, we will not pursue an extension of I-95 for the foreseeable future. Such an extension is not feasible, practicable, or prudent from a cost, impact, and permitting perspective. Instead, MaineDOT and local and regional leaders should continue to work together toward reasonably scoped projects on existing highways that will yield meaningful and tangible transportation improvements for The County.

Each of these four components is described in more detail below.

1. Complete Projects Already Programmed

MaineDOT has been aggressively using the recently enhanced level of federal and state funding to improve transportation in Aroostook County.

For example, the largest bridge project currently ongoing in Maine, the \$99-million International Bridge in Madawaska, is to be completed and open in the spring of 2024.

The 2023 edition of MaineDOT's three-year Work Plan included \$313 million in capital investments in Aroostook County, including 45 percent of all funding for highway reconstruction/rehabilitation in the entire state. This will result in significant improvement to 54 miles of highways, including the construction of the southerly segment of the Presque Isle Bypass, the only new capacity highway being developed by MaineDOT.

MaineDOT has already programmed numerous projects on the three high-priority highway corridors identified by both MaineDOT and the Advisory Group: Routes 1, 11 and 161. These projects include more than 15 miles of reconstruction on Route 1, more than 60 miles of paving on Route 11, and more than nine miles of reconstruction on Route 161. When these projects are completed, these three corridors will be built to a modern-day standard. More specifically, these projects include the following:

Route 1

Van Buren, 2.75-mile reconstruction, \$9.5 million, 2023 Congressionally Directed Spending (CDS) request received, (WIN 20421.00).

Van Buren, 1.91-mile reconstruction, \$6.1 million, 2023 CDS request received, (WIN 22658.00).

Frenchville, 5.74-mile reconstruction, \$21.7 million, federal Rural Surface Transportation (RURAL) discretionary grant awarded in December 2023, (WIN 22657.00).

Frenchville-Fort Kent, 4.66-mile reconstruction, \$18.8 million, federal RURAL discretionary grant awarded in December 2023, (WIN 22656.00).

Route 11

T2R8 WELS to Wallagrass, \$30 million for more than 60 miles of paving including eight miles of cold-in-place recycling, 2023 CDS request received, (WINS 26626.XX, 26732.00)

Route 161

Cross Lake TWP - New Canada, 5.22-mile reconstruction, \$15 million, 2024 CDS request pending, (WIN 26027.00).

Fort Kent, four-mile reconstruction, \$14.8 million, 2024 CDS request pending, (WIN 26025.00).

In addition to highway and bridge improvements, the state has invested heavily in the freight rail network in Aroostook County, which is critical to the regional economy. In 2010, the state purchased the primary freight rail lines serving Aroostook County, which were then threatened with abandonment. Since then, MaineDOT and Maine Northern Railway, the current railroad operator, have funded nearly \$80 million in investments. These improvements have spurred impressive growth in freight shipments – from 100 to 350 carloads per week on average in 2022 – an increase of 250 percent. More than 1,000 trucks per week would be needed to move the freight shipped by rail.

MaineDOT believes this work represents a robust level of investment, made possible by recent funding gains and the ongoing support of our Congressional delegation and Maine lawmakers. MaineDOT is working diligently to deliver these projects – some of which are newly in design as enhanced funding only recently arrived. We know from listening to public input during this process that this work cannot happen fast enough.

MaineDOT is looking to deliver projects as quickly as we responsibly can. Doing so requires consideration of multiple factors as the MaineDOT Work Plans are assembled and delivered, factoring in the needs of the entire state and market conditions including contractor capacity, which can impact the project costs. In sum, MaineDOT will continue to work hard to deliver the numerous projects already planned for the people of The County.

2. Develop New Corridor Management Plans for Routes 1, 11, and 161

Although the work already in the pipeline is substantial, MaineDOT wants to continue to work with municipal and regional officials to determine what additional improvements we can achieve together on the three priority highway corridors identified by both MaineDOT and the Advisory Group: Routes 1, 11, and 161. To do so, starting in 2024, MaineDOT will conduct a new corridor management study on one of these three corridors each year, resulting in a Corridor Management Plan for each.

These new Corridor Management Plans will be a wholistic analysis of current and reoccurring future needs of a highway corridor, resulting in maintenance, operations, and any additional capital strategies required to address those needs in a coordinated and systematic manner. Some of the items may be routine but critical maintenance activities including pavement marking, signage maintenance, mowing, and brush clearing aimed at reducing the frequency and severity of large animal crashes and lane departures. Smaller capital improvements such as work on

passing lanes, intersection improvements, and gateway improvements may be incorporated into scheduled paving projects.

Obviously, different portions of these highway corridors have different needs. The focus of most of the mileage in these corridors will be on safe, higher-speed mobility. Mobility considerations include safety, speed limits, inefficient intersections, pavement management strategies, road geometry, lack of passing lanes, pavement markings, signage, and vegetation management.

In village and downtowns areas, the focus will shift to lower speed, human scale considerations like pedestrians, bicycles, and shopping and civic activities. The transition zones between mobility to village sections – sometimes referred to as gateway treatments – also need to be given careful attention to assure motorists see and feel that a lower speed village area is ahead.

In all areas, MaineDOT will evaluate the feasibility of accommodating recreational vehicle (ATV and snowmobile) connections as they are important to the economic vitality of The County.

Route 1 from Houlton to Fort Kent (120 miles)

This plan will look at high accident locations along this corridor, assess the root causes, and recommend improvements as warranted. Most of this corridor has adequately paved shoulders, has open fields, or is developed such that vegetation management and additional pavement marking may not be a focal point on Route 1. However, speed limits, speed zone transitions, and village gateway/traffic calming should be looked at closely on this corridor. Long speed limit transitions, such as Route 1 leaving Mars Hill to the north, Caribou from the south, and Frenchville will be reevaluated and may be shortened to increase safety and mobility.

Although analyzed in the ACTS and suggested by the Advisory Group, MaineDOT does not currently intend to pursue new alignment capacity projects – such as bypasses around Bridgewater or Mars Hill – as part of this corridor management plan effort. Given huge increases in construction costs since the ACTS, more arduous permitting processes, and the limited time savings achievable, pursuing such projects would be impracticable and imprudent. If conditions change, including substantial new safety challenges or increases in population or economic activity that translate to a substantial increase in traffic volumes, MaineDOT would reconsider this decision.

As set forth below, these corridor management plans will reflect the results of voluntary Village Partnership Initiative (VPI) planning efforts between municipalities and MaineDOT. Even without a VPI, MaineDOT will also evaluate whether it can implement any lower cost safety measures relating to village areas, including gateway treatments in transition zones.

Route 11 from Sherman to Fort Kent (105 miles)

The new Corridor Management Plan for this corridor will include the elements of the Route 1 corridor, with the additional emphasis areas of signage, pavement markings, and vegetation management to reduce the frequency and severity of large animal and lane departure crashes. Passing lanes will also be evaluated in areas where slower vehicles may cause platooning for long distances, affecting safety and overall mobility.

Route 161 from Caribou to Fort Kent (44 miles)

Once the remaining segments of Route 161 are constructed, a Corridor Management Plan for this corridor will be developed in a similar way to that of Route 1 described above. These efforts would focus on a review of high crash locations, areas for passing lanes, and a comprehensive state of good repair strategy.

3. Invest in Village and Downtown Areas in The County

MaineDOT has created a Village Partnership Initiative (VPI) program to focus on projects in lower speed areas where people meet, walk, shop, and do business on a human scale. Our iconic New England villages are part of who we are, part of our brand, and a key part of our economy and quality of life. The goal of the Village Partnership Initiative is to make sure that once you “*get there from here*”, the *there* is a place you want to be. In this way, these projects can be bigger than transportation; they can become placemaking.

The Village Partnership Initiative is designed to be available to all willing communities that have or can develop a locally supported vision and plan for their village or downtown. Village projects can vary from small, spot improvements to large, once-in-a-lifetime investments. These projects have only become possible due to recently enhanced federal and state funding levels. Such improvements also generally require a joint effort to secure special federal funding such as through a discretionary Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) grant or Congressionally Directed Spending request. Some lower cost improvements – such as gateway improvement in transition zones – may be possible through traditional MaineDOT funding.

The Route 1 municipalities of Presque Isle, Caribou, Van Buren, Madawaska, and Fort Kent have all entered into VPI agreements with MaineDOT. In addition, MaineDOT will approach communities such as Houlton, Littleton, Monticello, and Bridgewater to determine if they would like to work with MaineDOT on a VPI planning process as well.

The Route 11 municipalities of Sherman, Patten, Ashland, Portage Lake, and Eagle Lake will be contacted to gauge interest in the VPI program.

4. Do Not Pursue an Extension of Interstate 95

After consideration of information provided by MaineDOT and input from the public, the Advisory Group found that *“a new alignment highway to the St. John Valley is not feasible for Maine at this time due to the practicability . . . , currently insurmountable construction costs, and a permitting process likely to be drawn out over multiple decades.”* See page 8 of Appendix B.

As MaineDOT has recently made clear in multiple ways, MaineDOT concurs with this assessment. Although those involved in the ACTS understand an extension of I-95 was very unlikely, ACTS documentation indicated that *“decisionmaking . . . was deferred for an unspecific amount of time.”* This lack of clarity has led to expectations by some that an interstate highway may be on the way.

Accordingly, MaineDOT needs to clarify this issue. For the reasons set forth in this report and prior studies, MaineDOT hereby expressly states that it does not intend to pursue an extension of Interstate 95 – or any other new alignment highway – from existing Interstate 95 to the St. John Valley in the foreseeable future. The word “foreseeable” means until such time as substantial new safety challenges develop or increases in population or economic activity translate to substantial increases in traffic volumes. Interstate 95 in Aroostook County is complete.

Such an extension of I-95 would not be feasible, practicable, or prudent from a cost, impact, and permitting perspective, especially in light of all the other transportation needs in The County, the state, and the nation. MaineDOT estimates that the total cost of a 90-mile extension of I-95 to the St. John Valley is \$3.5 billion in 2023 dollars. This does not include future ongoing maintenance or operating costs. Most Advisory Group members and the public indicated that even if we could raise this kind of money, they would likely want to spend it in other ways, and not all on an extension of I-95. Funding such a project is also not viable. Federal grant programs are highly competitive across the nation. Most grant awards for highway projects in Maine are in the \$25 million range. The highest grant received by MaineDOT in the post-BIL era was \$44.1 million for the upcoming southerly segment of the Presque Isle Bypass project. Programs that might provide funding for a project of this size generally require a 50-percent state/local match, which would be fiscally insurmountable. Permitting and designing a new alignment project of this scale would likely take decades and tens of millions of dollars.

Instead of continuing to discuss new highway alignments, MaineDOT intends to continue to collaborate with municipal and regional officials in The County on the three previous improvement strategies set forth above to achieve tangible real improvements to transportation over time.

As all the strategies set forth can be accomplished within current powers and authorities, MaineDOT does not recommend any additional legislation arising from this Resolve.

In closing, I would like to thank the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation for the impetus to conduct this dialogue. I also want to extend special thanks to the Advisory Group members for their diligent and thoughtful work and to the members of the public who provided comment and context. The strategies in this report are much better because of their work, which will lead to improvements to the special place that is The County.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bruce A. Van Note". The signature is written in a cursive style with a blue color.

Bruce A. Van Note
Commissioner – MaineDOT

APPROVED
 JUNE 20, 2023
 BY GOVERNOR

CHAPTER
 63
 RESOLVES

STATE OF MAINE

—
 IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD
 TWO THOUSAND TWENTY-THREE

—
 H.P. 384 - L.D. 607

**Resolve, to Direct the Department of Transportation to Examine Improving
 Highway Connections from Interstate 95 to the St. John Valley**

Sec. 1. Convene stakeholder group. Resolved: That the Department of Transportation shall convene and staff an advisory stakeholder group, referred to in this resolve as "the stakeholder group," to assist the department in identifying and developing strategies to address highway mobility and transportation needs in northern Maine. Meetings of the stakeholder group must take place in Aroostook County or a location that best suits the majority of the stakeholder group members.

Sec. 2. Stakeholder group membership. Resolved: That the stakeholder group consists of the following 11 members appointed by the Commissioner of Transportation:

1. A representative of the Northern Maine Development Commission;
2. A representative of a statewide transportation association;
3. Three municipal managers working in Aroostook County;
4. A representative of a trade association representing businesses located in northern Maine;
5. A representative of a trucking association representing companies or interests in northern Maine;
6. A representative from the Aroostook Partnership; and
7. Three representatives of trucking companies based in Aroostook County.

Sec. 3. Duties. Resolved: That the stakeholder group shall perform the following duties:

1. Determine to what extent the recommendations of the Aroostook County Transportation Study conducted by the Department of Transportation have been or will be implemented;
2. Review previous studies analyzing the feasibility of connecting Interstate 95 to the St. John Valley and Aroostook County with a new 90-mile divided highway or with improvements to existing highways;

3. Review the conceptual benefits, costs, permitting process and feasible funding sources of a highway connecting Interstate 95 to the St. John Valley and unorganized territory of Central Aroostook;
4. Review current and future highway improvement plans that include Aroostook County;
5. Recommend highway improvements that will substantially improve safety, mobility and economic opportunity in northern Maine; and
6. Identify the economic benefits, social benefits and cost of improved integration between highway systems in Canada and Maine.

Sec. 4. Report. Resolved: That, by December 31, 2023, the Department of Transportation shall submit a report that includes the findings and recommendations of the stakeholder group, including suggested legislation, to the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation. The Joint Standing Committee on Transportation may report out legislation based on the recommendations of the stakeholder group to the Second Regular Session of the 131st Legislature.



Report of the
Aroostook County
Advisory Stakeholder Group
to the
Maine Department of Transportation
setting forth the Group's
Findings and Recommendations
to Address Highway Mobility
And Transportation Needs
In Northern Maine

Pursuant to Resolve 2023, Chapter 63

December 22, 2023

Background

Pursuant to Resolve 23, Chapter 63 – *Resolve, to Direct the Department of Transportation to Examine Improving Highway Connections from Interstate 95 to the St. John Valley* (the Resolve, formerly LD 607) – the Maine Legislature directed the Maine Department of Transportation (MaineDOT) to convene and staff an advisory stakeholder group to assist MaineDOT in identifying and developing strategies to address highway mobility and transportation needs in northern Maine. The Resolve required that the meetings of the stakeholder group take place in Aroostook County or a location that best suits the majority of the stakeholder group members.

Specifically, the Resolve charged the stakeholder group to:

1. Determine to what extent the recommendations of the Aroostook County Transportation Study conducted by MaineDOT have been or will be implemented.
2. Review previous studies analyzing the feasibility of connecting Interstate 95 to the St. John Valley and Aroostook County with a new 90-mile-long, divided highway or with improvements to existing highways.
3. Review the conceptual benefits, costs, permitting process, and feasible funding sources of a highway connecting Interstate 95 to the St. John Valley and unorganized territory of central Aroostook County.
4. Review current and future highway improvement plans that include Aroostook County.
5. Recommend highway improvements that will substantially improve safety, mobility, and economic opportunity in northern Maine.
6. Identify the economic benefits, social benefits, and cost of improved integration between highway systems in Canada and Maine.

The Resolve further required that, by December 31, 2023, the Department of Transportation submit a report that includes the findings and recommendations of the stakeholder group to the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation. The Joint Standing Committee on Transportation may report out legislation based on the recommendations of the stakeholder group to the Second Regular Session of the 131st Legislature.

MaineDOT convened an advisory stakeholder group consistent with the Resolve with 11 members appointed by the Commissioner of Transportation:

Stakeholder	Representing
Robert Clark, NMDC	Northern Maine Development Commission
Herb Sargent, MBTA	Statewide Transportation Association
Gary Picard, Madawaska	Aroostook County Municipal Manager
Suzie Paradis, Fort Kent	Aroostook County Municipal Manager
Dana Fowler, Presque Isle	Aroostook County Municipal Manager
Jeannie Tapley, Maine Potato Board	Trade Association
Troy Haney, BIG Investment Group	Trucking Association
Paul Towle, Aroostook Partnership	Aroostook Partnership

Mark Chamberland, Chamberland Trucking	Trucking Company
Jeff Albert, Albert Farms	Trucking Company
Sherby Morris, Morris Logging	Trucking Company

The advisory stakeholder group was convened four times, including in-person meetings at three locations in The County.

Madawaska

The first of three in-person meetings of the Aroostook County Advisory Stakeholder Group was convened at the Knights of Columbus Hall in Madawaska on September 18, 2023. MaineDOT presented information about the history of extending the interstate system beyond Houlton, including the most recent Aroostook County Transportation Study that concluded in 2013; project overviews of the Caribou Connector and Presque Isle Bypass, which were results of that study; and what these projects mean to the downtowns of those communities.

Fort Kent

The second of three in-person meetings of the Aroostook County Advisory Stakeholder Group was convened at the Town Office in Fort Kent on October 12, 2023. MaineDOT presented information about the benefits, costs, permitting process, and feasibility of funding a new alignment highway connecting Interstate 95 in Houlton to the St. John Valley and unorganized territories of Center Aroostook County and reviewed the current and future highway improvement plans in Aroostook County.

Caribou

The final of three in-person meetings of the Aroostook County Advisory Stakeholder Group was convened at the Caribou Wellness and Recreation Center on November 14, 2023. MaineDOT prepared information about the highway connections with Canada and provided follow-up information about ongoing projects in Aroostook County before hearing from the public and stakeholders about their recommendations going forward.

Virtual Meeting – Zoom

A virtual meeting of the Aroostook County Advisory Stakeholder Group was held via Zoom on December 12, 2023. MaineDOT presented a meeting summary from the third in-person meeting in Caribou and provided a review of the draft Aroostook County Highway Connections Advisory Stakeholder Group Report. Members of the public and Advisory Stakeholders provided final thoughts and feedback on the draft report.

On December 15, 2023, a revised draft report was sent to the Aroostook County Highway Connections Advisory Stakeholder Group for comments. The comment period expired on December 22, 2023 with minimal additional comments. This is the final report.

Summary of Public and Stakeholder Discussions

Madawaska – September 18, 2023

The purpose and activities of the Advisory Stakeholder Group

The *Resolve* directs the Maine Department of Transportation to convene and staff an advisory stakeholder group to assist MaineDOT in identifying and developing strategies to address highway mobility and transportation needs in northern Maine. The result of this work will be a report to the Joint Committee on Transportation of the 131st Maine Legislature on the findings and recommendations.

The belief that the interstate was intended to be built to Fort Kent

Members of the public reiterated a long and deeply held belief that the interstate was planned or promised to be extended past Houlton. This belief is likely rooted from the original Maine Turnpike Authority enabling legislation from 1941 that granted the MTA the authority “to construct, operate, and maintain a turnpike... to a point at or near Fort Kent in Aroostook County.” In 1981, the northerly terminus of the Turnpike was revised to end in Augusta. However, the publicly funded interstate system first laid in 1947 and developed in the 1950s allocated 300 miles of Interstate Highway System to Maine. This was laid out between York and Houlton. There has never been any change to this northerly terminus of the interstate. Accordingly, MaineDOT and the Federal Highway Administration consider Maine’s interstate system is complete.

The deterioration of the roads in the St. John Valley and Aroostook County

There was extensive discussion about the built quality of the roads in Aroostook County and why these roads in particular developed swells, tent cracking, and frost heaves. Generally, it’s believed to be a combination of the substructure materials available within a reasonable distance from the road construction projects in Aroostook County, the volume of heavy commercial traffic that the state system in Aroostook County carries given the amount of agriculture and forestry in the area, and the current age and condition of the infrastructure.

The poor condition of Route 1 between Madawaska and Fort Kent

A member of the public noted that Route 1 between Madawaska and Fort Kent has deteriorated over time and that holding measures are no longer effective in maintaining a safe roadway. MaineDOT staff provided feedback that MaineDOT is seeking federal funding to support the reconstruction of Route 1 through Frenchville. Road reconstruction generally costs between \$3 million and \$5 million per mile. [On December 8, 2024, MaineDOT was awarded a Rural Surface Transportation Grant to reconstruct this portion of the highway.]

Route 11 safety and mobility improvements

The group heard additional feedback that Route 11 between Sherman and Fort Kent could be made safer by clearing and cutting vegetation beyond the roadway to improve visibility and reduce conflicts with animals, particularly at night.

Route 11 could be improved with passing lanes, some of which may be located on hills that can be used as truck climbing lanes. This would result in more consistent and predictable travel times between the existing interstate and points in the St. John Valley.

Fort Kent – October 12, 2023*The focus of the Advisory Stakeholder Group if there is not a discussion of an interstate extension*

Given the challenges of constructing a new alignment highway into Aroostook County, members of the public and the stakeholders group recognized that it was easier to improve current alignments than spend resources to develop new alignments. They asked whether it would be better to focus the goals of these discussions on realistic investment opportunities in the transportation system in Aroostook County and the St. John Valley. MaineDOT has consistently supported improvements to the current system.

Funding dedicated to Aroostook County in the Work Plan

MaineDOT responded to a question from the public about funding dedicated to Aroostook County: funding in the MaineDOT Work Plan is not allocated by county or any other geographic area. The work program is determined by several factors, including long-term planning, data-driven technical asset management principles, resource allocation principles arising from funding eligibility and system priorities, and community outreach.

Route 161 between Fort Kent and Caribou

There are two unbuilt segments of Route 161 that have been on MaineDOT's radar for reconstruction for several Work Plan cycles. The relatively low vehicle traffic and prioritization of Route 161 coupled with the scarcity of resources for highway reconstruction (estimated currently at \$3 million to \$5 million per mile) have not allowed MaineDOT to program these segments of road. With the new investments by the Maine Legislature and the era of discretionary funding for large-scale projects, MaineDOT can pursue the funding infrastructure projects like this one.

These two unbuilt segments of Route 161 in Fort Kent, New Canada, and Cross Lake are both in preliminary engineering now, and MaineDOT has requested Congressionally Directed Spending for both segments. The status of the CDS will be determined by the federal budget process.

Route 161 from St. Francis to Allagash

This segment of Route 161 is in deteriorating condition and needs attention. MaineDOT reported that this segment will be rehabilitated in 2024.

Gas tax and projects in Aroostook County

While personal vehicles and commercial trucking in Aroostook County contribute a significant amount of revenue to the Highway Fund, The County accounts for approximately five percent of vehicle-miles traveled in Maine and nearly eight percent of the total MaineDOT Work Plan investments.

Vehicles-miles traveled (VMT) and MaineDOT project scoping

MaineDOT responded to a technical question about how vehicle-miles traveled (VMT) are calculated. MaineDOT has a team of professional staff focused on gathering accurate and timely traffic counts and measuring vehicle-miles traveled. Traffic volumes are gathered using counters, which are the rubber tubing commonly seen on roadways, as well as weight and motion detectors to determine volumes and vehicle types. VMT relative to a geographic region may elevate the priority of funding for a construction project based on a road segment's regional significance.

Safety considerations for highway improvements

The safety of the transportation system is a top priority when it comes to potential highway improvements, and MaineDOT allocates funding to projects that improve the safety for all system users. In the most recent Work Plan, approximately \$190 million was allocated to 264 highway safety and spot improvements statewide. MaineDOT's Office of Safety and Mobility monitors the performance of each roadway segment, and safety measures are incorporated into each project.

The "milk cooler" of Maine

An advisory group member described Aroostook County and the St. John Valley as the "milk cooler" of Maine; this is a reference to travelers and tourists needing to drive through the rest of Maine like a grocery shopper needs to walk through a grocery store to access the milk cooler. The underlying sentiment is that Aroostook County is a commodity in which MaineDOT needs to invest, and the benefits will extend to the rest of Maine.

Route 11 railroad crossing in Winterville

The Route 11 railroad crossing in Winterville was discussed as a safety concern. Railroads generally have jurisdiction and responsibility over crossings. MaineDOT will work with the operating railroad to review the safety of this crossing.

Pleasant Street (Aroostook Road or Route 11) in Fort Kent

The Fort Kent Water District is currently replacing the water distribution system along the end of Pleasant Street. MaineDOT has a paving project scheduled to begin there at the conclusion of the utility work, which was previously scheduled for 2023.

Caribou – November 14, 2023Discretionary funding for infrastructure projects

Due to the extraordinary costs of highway rehabilitation, MaineDOT has put forward projects for discretionary funding. At the time of the meeting in Caribou, MaineDOT had submitted a rural grant for Route 1 in Frenchville and Congressionally Directed Spending (CDS) requests for two unbuilt sections of Route 161 in Fort Kent. [MaineDOT was successful in obtaining CDS funding for Route 1 in Van Buren and Route 11 in Ashland and received a Rural Surface Transportation Grant for Route 1 in Frenchville.]

Project delivery for Route 161

Route 161 is a priority corridor for Fort Kent and the St. John Valley to Caribou and points south; reconstruction of that road is a priority for the region. This project is in preliminary engineering and will be built to modern standards. MaineDOT is currently seeking special federal funding for this project and will begin the acquisition process after funding is received.

Improvements to the rail infrastructure will benefit Aroostook County

Improvements to the existing freight rail lines will help remove truck traffic from existing roads and bridges, preserving their structural integrity. Improvements to the lines would help increase the speed allowed for freight traffic.

The Presque Isle Bypass's impact on Presque Isle

The Presque Isle Bypass is being used more frequently, and the community is looking forward to the next phase of the Bypass being built. In the meantime, the Bypass is causing some truck traffic to continue to use Route 10 and Academy Street. The authority to post Academy Street for truck weights and enforcement is a topic that needs to be discussed with MaineDOT.

Village Partnership Initiatives in Aroostook County

Ongoing Village Partnership Initiative efforts in Madawaska, Fort Kent, and Presque Isle – as well as other communities – are highly anticipated. The public and stakeholder feedback on the value of placemaking activities for the transportation system, while prioritizing the safety and economic opportunities in Maine's downtowns and villages, has been positive. These efforts are welcome opportunities for the St. John Valley, and The County as a whole.

Infrastructure improvements should consider recreational vehicles (ATVs and snowmobiles)

Snowmobiles and ATVs are vital parts of the transportation system in Aroostook County and provide a significant level of economic activity for local restaurants and hotels. Bridges should be widened to accommodate snowmobile and ATV use and snowmobile trail crossings should be elevated for safety improvements and infrastructure development. MaineDOT shared that consideration for alternative vehicle use is considered in project development and that winter maintenance of adequate snow levels and trail function is left up to local agreements.

Funding for infrastructure Improvements

While Maine does not have the necessary resources to fund the expansion of a new alignment for Interstate 95 north of Houlton, other funding opportunities were discussed, including a request to the federal government for funding, given the relatively low cost of a new highway when compared to defense spending, or the sale of the Loring Commerce Center to Elon Musk for private business activities for a sum that enables the interstate to be expanded into northern Aroostook County.

Virtual Meeting – December 12, 2023*Renewed interest in new alignment segments around Madawaska*

The stakeholder group heard calls for a bypass around or from Madawaska to accommodate traffic that will return to Madawaska with the opening of the international crossing that has been posted for weight restrictions since 2018. Possible alignments include connection from Route 1 to 161 via the Ovellette Road, which is similar to Segment 1 from the Final Environmental Impact Study resulting from the Aroostook County Transportation Study completed in 2013.

Route 11 improvement recommendations related to mobility and safety

The stakeholder group also heard about opportunities to improve Route 11, specifically around Masardis. These suggested improvements included steep grade issues to the north that are challenging for truck traffic and to the south a segment of Route 11 that has limited mobility due to large commercial truck traffic to and from the mill. The steep grade leaving Portage Lake to the north, which was recently reconstructed, is a challenge for large truck traffic and most difficult during winter weather.

An understanding that a new four-lane interstate isn't viable, but never is a long time

Members of the public and Advisory Stakeholder Group commented that the findings listed in the draft report from the Advisory Stakeholder Group required some nuance to reflect the fact that a new alignment interstate segment isn't viable for Maine and for Aroostook County *at this time*, but that never is a long time.

Consideration should be given to the long-term goals of residents of Aroostook County and the Stakeholders that would like to keep an interstate expansion hope alive should other economic factors change, and that in the meantime, the remaining segments of the Aroostook County Transportation Study completed in 2013 should be considered for implementation.

Findings of the Advisory Stakeholder Group

The purpose of the *Resolve*, like the prior Aroostook County Transportation Study completed in 2013, was to identify and evaluate transportation alternatives that would improve the region's economy by improving transportation mobility. Achieving a single, universally held vision of a path forward will always be challenging due to the reasonable, but differing perspectives of all stakeholders.

Based on the information presented by MaineDOT staff and the input heard from the public during the three in-person meetings, the Advisory Stakeholder Group found that permitting, funding, and constructing a new alignment of interstate to the St. John Valley would be challenging and unrealistic, given the extensive needs of Maine's transportation system and the extraordinary cost of new road construction.

Previous plans to extend the interstate to the St. John Valley

There is a continued belief by some that the interstate system is incomplete and was intended to reach Fort Kent, although all records indicated the federal Interstate Highway System has always ended in Houlton. In 1941 the Maine State Legislature passed "*An Act to Create the Maine Turnpike Authority*" creating an independent state agency charged with constructing a highway from "some point at or near Kittery to some point at or near Fort Kent," which may be the source of this belief.

MaineDOT presented a historical review of the previous plans to connect Interstate 95 to the St. John Valley with a new 90-mile-long divided highway or improvements to existing highways. In 1956, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed into law the Interstate Highway System, based on the general locations from the first alignments proposed in 1947. Testimony provided to the Legislative Research Committee by Maine Highway Commissioner David H. Stevens in November 1957 noted that the length of the interstate system approved in 1947 represented the 300 miles allocated to Maine and aligned the highway along main corridors of traffic, taking defense requirements into account. MaineDOT and the Federal Highway Administration consider the alignment of I-95 to be complete based on the Federal Highway Administration's Record of Decision.

Implementation of the Aroostook County Transportation Study

A preferred corridor was not identified at the conclusion of the Aroostook County Transportation Study (ACTS) in 2013. Rather, the 14-year study identified the Caribou Connector and Presque Isle Bypass as the environmentally preferred alternatives from a set of transportation improvements that meet the purpose and need of enhancing safety and mobility within Aroostook County.

The Advisory Stakeholder Group finds that the deferred decision by the department may have caused frustration among the public and elected officials, and that while additional studies are not needed, the public needs to continue to be engaged in infrastructure improvements for Aroostook County. While the majority of the Advisory Stakeholder Group understands that the results of the ACTS have been

implemented and that a new alignment for the interstate is not a viable option for Maine, there remains a minority of stakeholders that expressed a long-term goal to expand a controlled access highway to the St. John Valley.

Costs of expanding the interstate to the St. John Valley

To assist the stakeholders in understanding the costs associated with a new alignment facility, MaineDOT presented information on estimates of expanding I-95 to the St. John Valley through Smyrna Mills to Madawaska. The exact location of this alignment would need to be determined, but the breakdown that was discussed reflects conceptual construction costs common to all alternatives. This estimate assumes the use of existing built and funded portions, including the Presque Isle Bypass and Caribou Connector, which have a combined cost of \$128 million.

Project Component	Construction Cost
Caribou Connector/Presque Isle Bypass	\$128 million
Major Bridges	\$780 million
Interchanges	\$165 million
Interstate Corridor	\$1.66 billion
Total New Alignment Highway	\$2.73 billion
Preliminary Engineering, Right of Way Acquisition, Construction Engineering, Mitigation, etc.	Potentially an additional 30 percent
Total Overall Cost	\$3.55 billion

Additionally, the special funding available for large-scale infrastructure projects is limited compared with the extraordinary need for building a new alignment highway. Discretionary and competitive funding grants for projects historically range from \$25 million to \$40 million, and new grant programs have a required match of 50 percent of total project costs. Project cost estimates of more than \$3 billion represent a figure that is 60 times more than Maine's largest grant for infrastructure projects.

Given this information, the Advisory Stakeholder Group finds that a new alignment highway to the St. John Valley is not feasible for Maine at this time due to the practicability of transportation system improvements, currently insurmountable construction costs, and a permitting process likely to be drawn out over multiple decades.

Stakeholder Recommendations

Additionally, the Advisory Stakeholder Group identified meaningful and substantial ways that mobility and safety could be improved throughout the existing highway system in Aroostook County, including:

Revisit the unconstructed segments from the Aroostook County Transportation Study

The additional segments recommended in the ACTS should be reevaluated as projects, including but not limited to the bypasses around Bridgewater, Monticello, and Mars Hill to improve the mobility of lower Route 1 from Presque Isle to Houlton.

Invest in Aroostook County's villages and downtowns

MaineDOT's Village Partnership Initiative is a welcomed opportunity for the communities of Aroostook County that have strong local visions for what their community center, village, or downtown can be. The Advisory Stakeholder Group recognized this value and encouraged MaineDOT to continue investment in places in Aroostook County and to take advantage of unprecedented levels of discretionary funds to achieve local goals and create places where people want to live, find employment, and recreate.

Signage and reflectors for safety on Route 11

A project was suggested to MaineDOT that additional safety measures, including signage and reflectors, be added to the Route 11 corridor in areas where wildlife is likely to cross.

Additional capacity on Route 11

Improved shoulders and the addition of passing lanes should be considered for mobility throughout the 106-mile-long Route 11 corridor from exit 263 in Sherman to Fort Kent.

Recreational vehicles should be considered in project design

In addition to standard construction principals, project development for highway and bridge projects in The County should consider designing infrastructure that invites and encourages travelers to visit the region. Recreational vehicles, such as ATVs and particularly snowmobiles, should be considered when designing bridges and highways, as the economic and transportation benefits are disproportionately strong in northern Maine as compared to the rest of the state.

Increasing costs of road maintenance impacts towns and cities

The Local Roads Assistance Program funding level has been flat for years, and there is a call to increase those funds which support communities' maintenance of public roads as construction costs have continued to increase without increases to funding mechanisms.

The following two recommendations were provided by a member of the Advisory Stakeholder Group after the final meeting on December 12, 2023. As such, they were never discussed, debated, and agreed to by the whole Group.

Completion of a benefit cost analysis of a new alignment highway

MaineDOT provided information to the Stakeholder Group that no Benefit Cost Analysis (BCA) has been performed for an I-95 extension or similar new alignment highway with controlled access. Given that nearly all major projects involving federal funding require a BCA to show good stewardship of the public's tax dollars, it is recommended that a BCA be conducted for a new alignment highway in Aroostook County. The results of the BCA, while not a sole deciding factor for all stakeholders since other recent and proposed highway projects in Maine have a benefit cost ratio of less than one, might serve as a contributing factor in any future discussions regarding the construction of a new alignment highway.

Future Advisory Stakeholder Group meetings

The recommendations of the Stakeholder Group are based on current economic and transportation needs in Aroostook County and the availability of funds, which are constantly changing. Since there is the possibility of future development which could create the need for new highway capacity, no one can ever say “never” as a final answer to the possibility of a new alignment highway in Aroostook County. Therefore, it is recommended that an Advisory Stakeholder Group be convened periodically, not to exceed every four years, with the purpose of reviewing all pertinent information and offering recommendations to MaineDOT on Aroostook County’s transportation needs.