

BEST OF 2016: WHAT ARE YOU DOING, MAINE?

DECEMBER 6, 2016

BY CHARLES MAROHN

Probably the most bizarre project I saw this year is the proposed construction of a new highway segment in Shreveport, Louisiana. Not only is it unnecessary for traffic reasons, not only is it only being done in pursuit of the [Ponzi scheme of growth](#), not only is the city and state already struggling to maintain their *existing* critical infrastructure, not only will it cost a fortune and not only is it a huge distraction for a city that has great things



going on in other places that it should be urgently building upon, the new highway segment is -- in a throwback to the 1950's and 1960's -- scheduled to run right through the middle of a poor, largely- African American neighborhood.



I sat with the people in that neighborhood and listened to their stories. It was heart-wrenching. With all the lessons we supposedly learned from the Urban Renewal era, we still seem very willing to cast aside neighborhoods of people working together when they get in the way of our short term economic growth objectives. Who serves whom in this system?

We need to dramatically change how we initiate capital projects. Top/down bureaucratic systems do a terrible job of identifying need, tending to view humans as Sims in some type of life simulation instead of real people with real struggles. In a country where we've massively overbuilt and will actually be contracting -- not expanding -- most infrastructure systems in the coming decades, new capital projects must start with actual people on the ground and their urgent needs. They are not hard to discern when we humble ourselves to look for them.

This project in Maine is sadly very typical of what we see around the country; a financially fragile local government trying to represent the needs of people in their community getting run over by a project being pushed from afar. As we seem ready to pour hundreds of billions of dollars into similar endeavors in the coming year, the need to reform this approach becomes more and more urgent.

Last year I gave a [talk in Maine](#) on transportation. The focus of the talk can be neatly summarized as follows: *We have overbuilt our auto-based transportation infrastructure and lack the money to maintain it all.* Thus, the system is going to contract in the coming years. If we want to prosper, we need to start thinking differently about transportation, starting with a realization that places built for automobiles lose money while places built for people generate lasting wealth. Stroads, hierarchical road networks, forgiving design, congestion, complete streets, etc...

The talk is a pretty sharp rebuke to transportation officials who have planned and spent us into this mess. A lot of this is obvious -- and I presented it that way -- so the people who mindlessly perpetuate the current system come off looking...well....pretty mindless. "*We've run out of money, it's time to start thinking;*" is the quote I use. It's a powerful conversation.

Which is why I very often have engineers and others involved in that mindless system come up to me afterwards to assure me that they get it, that they are different. I always thank them and urge them to keep pushing for change, remind them that the wind is at their back and, if they lead, the public is ready to follow. We need them.

In Maine, I met with a cadre from their state's transportation department immediately after my talk. They were adamant – **adamant** – that the Strong Towns insights did not apply to them. I was assured – rather dismissively – that they had years ago come to the realization that they couldn't afford the path they were on, that they had made major changes and were now a model for the country. I was even told they were "maintenance only" and, even then, had internal plans to scale back many existing roadways. I was urged to study Maine and share their successes for others to emulate.

SOMETHING HAS GONE TERRIBLY WRONG IN MAINE

I'm not sure if I was lied to by a codependent (the most convincing kind of liar because they've already convinced themselves), if Maine has subsequently fallen off the wagon and gone back to their old ways, or if the elixir of [a federal transportation bill last December](#) was just too seductive, but something has gone terribly wrong in Maine.

Terribly wrong.

Let's start with this headline: [Planners claim state forced them to approve I-395 connector project](#). From the article:

Characterizing it as a "distasteful vote" and saying they were "held hostage," members of the Bangor Area Comprehensive Transportation System's policy committee said they did not like being forced to approve a new three-year plan that includes the Interstate 395-Route 9 connector or risk losing \$57 million in road project funding this year for the Bangor urbanized region, which includes 10 neighboring communities.

"Despite traffic not meeting projections in recent years ("due to the recession"), engineers are confident it will more than double in the coming years."

Some background on the \$61 million 395-Route 9 connector project before we get into the "distasteful" part. According to the [environmental documents](#), traffic on the stretch is a mere 5,000 vehicles per day (pg 22). Not to fret; despite traffic [not meeting projections](#) in recent years ("due to the recession"), engineers are confident it will more than double in the coming years. Thus the need for the project.

There are four specific reasons the project is needed, in the eyes of Maine transportation officials. They are (pg 1 - bold mine):

1. Have a route that meets the standards outlined in the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) A Policy on Geometric Design of Highways and Streets;
2. **Improve** regional system linkage;
3. **Improve** safety on Routes 1A and 46;
4. **Improve** the current and future flow of traffic and the shipment of goods to the interstate system.

A SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

Incidentally, in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, the “need” for the project is determined by the values and assumptions DOT officials begin with. *We must meet the standard and we must improve, Improve, IMPROVE.* These are the exact bureaucratic values we eviscerate in our Transportation in the Next American City chat but, nonetheless, it makes the notion of a no-build analysis rather silly, something DOT officials acknowledge (pg 25):

The No-Build Alternative would not satisfy the study's purpose and needs or the USACE's basic purpose as it would not improve regional mobility and system linkage; would not improve safety; and would not reduce traffic congestion. The No-Build Alternative is retained for detailed analysis to allow equal comparison to the build alternatives and to help decision makers understand the ramifications of taking no action. The impacts of the No-Build Alternative were fully developed for design year 2035 to demonstrate the full impact of taking no action. Comparing the build alternatives with the current and future NoBuild Alternative is essential for measuring the true benefits and adverse impacts of the build alternatives considered in detail.



Photo by Teddy Wade

Let me paraphrase: We're going to build this thing because **we must improve**. The feds force us to consider a No-Build option in our analysis, which is rather silly since not building is clearly not under consideration since, by definition, it wouldn't IMPROVE anything and **we must improve**. To deal with this annoyance, we use the No-Build scenario as a way to show everyone how *totally awesome* everything we're going to do is. Feds are happy. We're happy. Public process requirements fulfilled. Yada, yada, yada.....

So progressive and farsighted Maine starts with the premise that we need to meet all the requirements contained in Leviticus....er....AASHTO and that they have a mandate to improve, improve and improve. Let's pause here and consider the environment in which this narrow mindset dwells.

A NARROW MINDSET

This month the Maine Development Foundation and Maine Economic Growth Council released a report called [*Measures of Growth 2016*](#) that identified Maine's "crumbling transportation infrastructure" as a "red flag". In all categories reported, the condition of Maine's roads began the study period in really bad shape and declined further.

The Maine Department of Transportation's latest three-year work plan shows [an annual shortfall of \\$168 million](#) just for what is called "basic road and bridge maintenance" meaning each year they fall further and further behind in just the basics. Bridges alone need an [additional \\$70 million annually if they are to be "safe"](#) which, one would think, should constitute an emergency of sorts.

And while the legislature is pondering additional revenue, the wildest conversations happening at the state capitol [don't come near filling this gap](#):

Based on a return of about \$7 million dollars for every penny of tax assessed, [Representative Andrew] McLean said that 5 cents would generate about \$35 million dollars per year in additional revenue for road and bridge repairs. According to the Tax Foundation, that would place Maine at about 35 cents per gallon in state gas taxes and among the 10 states with the highest gas taxes in the country.

Let me pause and summarize where we are at thus far in this story: Maine – despite assurances I received from top DOT officials there – lacks the money it needs to do basic maintenance on its transportation system. There is no likely scenario that said money will materialize. All this they have clearly acknowledged. Their institutional response to this emergency – and it is an emergency – is to cling to AASHTO's archaic code book – the gold standard of antiquated dogma – while projecting a value system of improve, Improve, IMPROVE, even going so far as to assume massive traffic increases where there is little traffic today.

"CHAOTIC BUT SMART" THINKING NEEDED

A central tenant of Strong Towns thinking is a faith in ["chaotic but smart"](#) approaches, organic and incremental growth—with all its good and bad—as a way to discover what works, make government more responsive and have investments that meet the real needs of



people. I've long advocated for inverting our national power structure to give cities more authority and responsibility while reducing the complexity of our centralized systems.

That has been too far for some of you. Some in this audience have expressed concerns that cities would mess this up, that centralized authority is needed to ensure that we're not held hostage by the parochial concerns of locals, that things of import get done. Others have argued that cities would simply run over the lowly and disadvantaged, that centralized decision making and the established environmental review and public engagement processes are needed to protect the vulnerable and make sure everyone is heard.

BACK TO OUR STORY...

Let me [share this quote](#), which was made immediately following the vote to move forward with the I-395 project:

"Watching this unfold today, in my humble opinion, is precisely why people have lost faith in government," Brewer City Manager Steve Bost told the panel.

He described Thursday's process as "an unyielding bureaucracy that is unwilling to listen and unwilling to move" and said state and federal officials have not listened to the communities, including Brewer which has had three unanimous City Council votes opposing the state's plans.

"I believe that if the Maine public knew what was going on in this room today, that all those projects would be essentially set aside if you do what is in your heart. I think they would be very displeased," Bost said.

Seem a little dramatic? It shouldn't. Not only is this unnecessary project going to require [destruction of seven homes](#) and impacts to 54 other properties, but when asked to weigh in, local elected bodies have repeatedly opposed it:

Opponents have held forums that attempted to stop the project. The Brewer City Council voted unanimously [in opposition to the roadway](#). The Holden Town Council also [voted against it](#). Eddington residents have voted against the plan and community leaders have spent years requesting and even [suing for information](#) about it.

"Not only is this unnecessary project going to require destruction of seven homes and impacts to 54 other properties, but when asked to weigh in, local elected bodies have repeatedly opposed it."

A narrow 3-2 vote of support from the newly elected council in Eddington is seemingly the only positive expression of local support. Still, we should all rest assured that, regardless of any dissatisfaction with the outcome, the appropriate process for public input has been followed:

Jonathan Nass, deputy director of the Department of Transportation, said the state has taken great care to consider the concerns of residents, pointing out there have been 20 public advisory committee meetings, three public meetings and one public hearing on the project over the years.

"MaineDOT has listened many times to residents that have submitted comments to us and responded to those comments," Nass wrote in an email, noting the project website includes a 332-page document consisting of meeting records, public comments and state responses.

Yes, little people. Your DOT may have spent themselves into insolvency. They may even be asking for more of your money. You may not share their values and – gosh darnit – you may not even drive as much as they project you should. But at least they've listened to you. At least they took the time to respond to your comments.

And because you've played along, little people, your region will get the additional \$57 million in transportation funding you so desire. Thank you for being so economically fragile and needy.

This is far beyond distasteful. *An unyielding bureaucracy that is unwilling to listen and unwilling to move.* Apparently also unwilling to think.

This is stupid, Maine. You're broke. What are you doing?

SEE ALL OUR BEST CONTENT OF 2016

(Top photo by Ryan Stubbs)

RELATED STORIES



DEBT IS NOT A
FUNDING SOURCE



A DECADE OF
STRONG TOWNS:



RUNNING
GOVERNMENT LIKE A