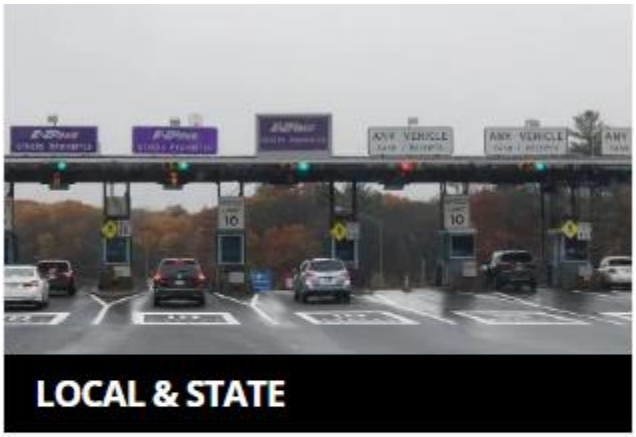
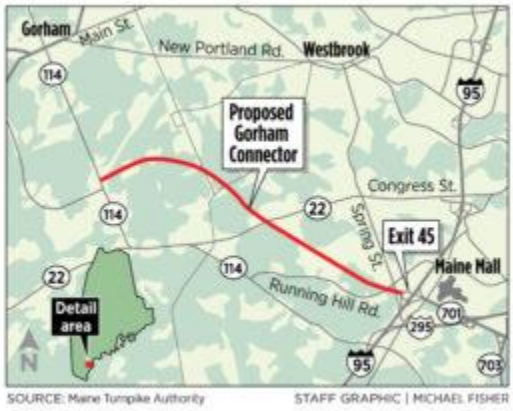
Portland Press Herald





Estimated cost for Gorham connector: 60% more than expected

But Maine Turnpike officials believe the toll highway, projected to open in 2026, would still pay for itself. Click here to view article online.

BY PETER MCGUIRE STAFF WRITER | 11.29.2019

Building a 5-mile toll highway linking the Maine Turnpike to the suburbs west of Portland could cost almost 60 percent more than expected but will still generate enough revenue to pay for itself, a turnpike official says.

The Maine Turnpike Authority board of directors last week authorized staff to negotiate land purchases for the Gorham Connector, a limited-access highway designed to alleviate commuter traffic on local roads.

The proposed road would connect the turnpike exit near the Maine Mall in South Portland to Route 114, south of Gorham.

By its projected opening in 2026, the four-lane highway will cost at least $191 million and as much as $237 million, according to a report this month from HNTB, an infrastructure design firm. That exceeds the $150 million that the Legislature approved two years ago for construction borrowing for the project.

Despite higher prices than projected, a new $1.50 toll route would pay for itself and bring tens of thousands of vehicles off surface roads and onto the state's main highway, said Peter Mills, executive director of the turnpike authority.

"Even at a higher construction cost, it still works," he said. "Why? The traffic is crazy out there."

The only reason it works with this project is that it will be a toll road. DOT dismissed tolling on the I-395/Route 9 connector years ago and it would be hard to imagine how a rural two lane road could be even set up with toll booths.

I added this article just to show the increase in construction costs over just 2 years from when this project was approved – an increase of $41 million (+27%) to $87 million (+58%) since 2017.

The I-395/Route 9 connector was estimated to cost $79.25 million in 2017 which raises the questions: what's the cost now and how will the DOT pay for it? What does the increase in cost do to the benefit/cost ratio that "proved" the viability of the project?

A similar increase in construction costs will bring the $79.25 million cost of the I-395/Route 9 connector over the $100 million threshold, from $100.648 to $125.215 million. What does that do to the original Benefit/Cost ratio of 1.3? I contend that any increase over $ 103.025 million will bring the B/C ratio below 1.0 and prove the project as no longer viable.

We may already be close to that or even blown right through it at this time.

Can the DOT be trusted to advise us when that happens? Really??