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New interchange on Maine Turnpike is planned to ease commuter traffic in Saco

Crippling rush-hour congestion on the sole existing exit for Saco and surrounding communities presents a safety hazard.

BY [PETER MCGUIRE](#) STAFF WRITER | 1.20.2020 | [CLICK HERE TO VIEW ONLINE](#).

Relief is on the way for commuters used to daily traffic headaches around the sole interstate exit in Saco, as the Maine Turnpike Authority plans a \$40.7 million interchange to alleviate congestion.

The morning and afternoon rush hours turn Exit 36 and nearby roads, including Route 112, into a morass of vehicles trying to get to Saco or communities west of the city.

The problem is concentrated around an approach to Industrial Park Road, which connects to Route 112. In the morning, left turns from vehicles traveling east slow commuters, while in the afternoon traffic stacks up behind a traffic light on Industrial Park Road. Almost 17,000 vehicles use the road daily.

“Industrial Park Road is kind of a bottleneck,” said Peter Merfeld, chief operations officer at the Maine Turnpike Authority. “Getting to the turnpike is difficult in the morning and getting off the turnpike is problematic in the afternoon.”

Crippling traffic creates serious safety concerns, as well as aggravation for drivers. In the evening rush hour a steady line of slow-moving vehicles sometimes backs up onto the turnpike’s main line, an unacceptably risky situation.

“Depending on how long the line is, traffic might stop in open lanes. Now you have stopped traffic and 75-mph traffic adjacent to each other. That creates a higher possibility of collisions,” Merfeld said.



To address the problem, the turnpike authority plans to reopen and expand a disused highway on-off ramp south of Exit 36 and build new ramps west of the highway. The hope is commuters from towns west of Saco, such as Buxton, Hollis and Limington, will use the new exit, reducing the burden on Exit 36.

“The point is, for the afternoon traffic, they just have a simple right turn heading west instead of going through the gantlet of Industrial Park Road,” Merfeld said. Construction is slated to begin in 2022.

The area has had a worsening traffic problem for years. More than 30,600 vehicles use the exit every day, 20 percent more than in 2011, according to a turnpike traffic study.

“There is a high level of frustration that I feel and my constituents that drive this stretch every single day feel,” said Sen. Justin Chenette, D-Saco. “The congestion and backups are like headache after headache.”

Chenette submitted a bill to the Legislature last year asking for \$24 million in state highway funding to improve traffic in the area in case the interchange expansion was not included in the turnpike authority’s newest four-year investment plan. Since the project is now in the plan, Chenette said he has asked the Legislature’s Transportation Committee to kill his bill.

“This is critical to our area, to our economy, to our way of life that we have these improvements,” Chenette said. “Our entire region utilizes this one exit.”

He doesn’t believe adding another highway interchange in the region contradicts state and regional efforts to reduce traffic and [greenhouse gas pollution](#) by [curbing urban sprawl and improving public transit](#).

“To me, this is not about just building more roads; it is about changing and modifying the existing roadways to be more efficient and safe for people,” he said. “This is not a philosophical debate about more public transit over roads.”

As it waits for construction to start, the city of Saco hopes to ease traffic by altering two intersections on Route 112. Left turns onto and from Garfield Street are now prohibited and a traffic signal will be installed at the intersection with Jenkins Road, said City Engineer Joe Laverriere.

"We are always tweaking signal timing, but we are not adding lanes or anything like that," he said.

Saco and the Maine Department of Transportation are using traffic signals to address traffic problems on Main Street/Route 1, a heavily used thoroughfare in town, he added.

The turnpike project should help at least this congested part of the city, he said.

"It is hard to take all the traffic from adjacent communities through that one corridor," Laverriere said. "I think this project is aimed at other options to get to the turnpike. Hopefully that will help us out."

Is anyone listening? Does it matter whether it's the DOT or the Turnpike Authority making these fiscal decisions? Didn't the DOT just tell us the dire condition of our infrastructure?

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"This is not a philosophical debate about more public transit over roads."It is always a debate! There's only so much money in the budget. You're spending 40 million dollars on one (1!) exit. Up in Gorham the state is spending \$250 million on 6 miles of toll highway. There is a traffic engineering phenomena known as induced demand - building more roads and easing congestion results in more traffic to fill the upgraded capacity. In the worst case, the traffic hits a new bottleneck somewhere else and everyone's commute still sucks. How much money do we waste on incremental 'little tweaks' like this before we add a proper regional commuter network?

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