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MaineDOT Commissioner Ends Plans To Build Bypass Around Wiscasset

AUGUSTA, Maine – Maine Department of Transportation Commissioner David Bernhardt announced today that MaineDOT will terminate the Wiscasset Route 1 Corridor Study, which will end any plans to build a bypass around the coastal community.

“The cost of building the bypass far exceeds any potential benefits to motorists and the communities,” said MaineDOT Commissioner David Bernhardt. “At a time when **we have difficulty finding the financial resources to maintain our existing infrastructure**, I cannot justify the expense of building a bypass around Wiscasset.”

The decision to end the corridor study was the result of an evaluation of the options for moving forward and the associated costs. Since the June, 2010 discovery of an undocumented eagle’s nest along the previously approved proposed route, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers subsequently informed MaineDOT that the proposed route was no longer acceptable, and that MaineDOT would need to submit a new application for a different alternative.

Since that time, MaineDOT has met with the affected communities, held a Midcoast Bypass Task Force meeting and a public information meeting in December 2010, and solicited public comment in order to decide whether to proceed and resubmit the application for a different alternative route.

Current estimates for the proposed bypass are close to \$100 million. Up until the past year, MaineDOT thought that over time the funding for the bypass would become available. However, since that time the potential for funding this project has dwindled, with flat federal transportation funding, and Congress has ended the practice of “earmarking” funding for special projects.

“Adding more miles to our transportation system in this current fiscal environment doesn’t make financial sense,” said Bernhardt, “Our responsibility going forward is to manage our existing infrastructure within our existing budget.”

With current funding levels stable at best, MaineDOT concluded that the expenditure of funds on new infrastructure was not justifiable.

“The long-term financial forecast for transportation funding makes it difficult to continue to spend scarce resources on such a large, financially unviable project,” said Bernhardt, “We are struggling to maintain the roads and bridges we currently have in safe and serviceable condition.”

“A project of this magnitude requires major federal participation as well as some type of special funding from the state,” said Bernhardt, “We simply do not see this type of funding becoming available in the foreseeable future.”

The proposed bypass options were designed to lessen traffic impacts along the Route 1 corridor in Edgecomb and Wiscasset. Over the past few years, MaineDOT has worked with the communities to find solutions to the traffic congestion, and will continue to look for new solutions and technologies to lessen the area traffic impacts at a price the state can afford.

The decision to end the corridor study will also have a positive impact on property owners in the area impacted by the proposed bypass alignments.

“We realize that the bypass has impacted people who own property along the proposed routes, clouding them in uncertainty, unable to sell their property if they wanted to,” said Bernhardt, “By this action I am taking today, our hope is that the uncertainty is now gone, and they can move forward with their plans for their property.”

MaineDOT will continue to move forward with solutions to help alleviate some of the traffic issues.

“We recognize that summer traffic continues to be a major problem in Wiscasset and Edgecomb. Even though we’ve decided not to build a bypass, we will take a serious look at some of the potential improvements that came out in the study. We’re also going to work aggressively with the communities to implement solutions such as real-time traffic information and traffic officers to help alleviate some of the backup,” said Bernhardt.

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The fiscal environment is even worse than it was in 2011, when common sense momentarily kicked in and the DOT cancelled a project eerily similar to the \$100 million I-395 connector project. What’s the difference now?