

State scuttles Wiscasset Route 1 bypass

By Seth Koenig, Brunswick Times Record • August 3, 2011

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WISCASSET — Maine Transportation Commissioner David Bernhardt on Monday announced that — after more than 50 years of debate, fits and starts — plans for a Route 1 bypass around downtown Wiscasset are being abandoned.

“The cost of building the bypass far exceeds any potential benefits to motorists and the communities,” Bernhardt announced in a statement. “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.”

Bernhardt’s decision grinds to a halt the ongoing, but glacial, progress toward a new highway that would avoid the town’s village and give coastal motorists a less congested path to Boothbay and Rockland.

Talks about establishing such a route first began in the late 1950s. Traffic volume increased over time, and state transportation officials intensified discussion of building a new road in the mid-1990s.

Donald Jones, chairman of the Wiscasset Transportation Committee and a member of the local task force studying bypass options, said he’s been working toward development of a bypass since 1991.

After hearing the news in a midday conference call with top MDOT officials Monday, Jones said his immediate reaction was to wonder what potentially “intrusive” measures the department might employ to ease traffic through the downtown if not the bypass.

“Not building a bypass makes me say, ‘OK, what are we going to do now?’ It makes me worry,” Jones told The Times Record by phone Monday evening. “On a personal level, I feel it’s been a great waste of the last 20 years that I’ve been spending on this issue.”

MDOT last month began funding the placement of two traffic control police officers in the downtown to help pedestrians cross and cars move along in orderly turns.

Frank Risell, of Wiscasset, serves as co-chairman of a citizens’ group opposed to the bypass project called R.O.A.D. (Route One Alternative Decisions). Risell said state transportation officials are still considering upgrades to the intersections of Route 27 and Route 1 on both sides of the Sheepscot River as well.

"We welcome the news that the bypass may be dead, but we're also convinced that they still need to do something to improve what we have," Risell, who leads the R.O.A.D. group alongside Morrison Bonpasse of Newcastle, told The Times Record. **"We did not want a bypass because we didn't see the need for it, or (understand) why we'd spend \$100 million on that when there are a lot of other roads that need that work."**

The road to constructing a bypass was a bumpy one, even in recent years, when the project was described by Maine Department of Transportation representatives as an eventuality, despite uncertainties surrounding funding.

But in late November 2010, state transportation officials announced that the one proposed bypass route, after years of debate, to receive the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' blessing must be thrown out due to a protected eagle's nest in its path. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's determination that the nest could not be moved to make way for the project left MDOT officials considering whether to dust off previous route options and try again for Army Corps approval of a different path — or to drop the bypass project altogether.

The route blocked by the eagle's nest was titled "N8c." It stretched for 3.2 miles and featured a bridge across the Sheepscot River to Davis Island in Edgecomb, where it would reconnect with Route 1 near an MDOT maintenance facility.

Another previous option — N2a — was the only proposed bypass route to gain support from both state officials and members of a local task force studying the subject, but hadn't been given the Army Corps' OK.

"We did not want a bypass because we didn't see the need for it, or (understand) why we'd spend \$100 million on that when there are a lot of other roads that need that work." August 2011 Frank Risell

This is what the City of Brewer has been saying since January 2012. In 2020, the cost is identical, we still do not see the need for the connector and there are lots of other roads that need that money!