

Maine Turnpike traffic down sharply amid coronavirus outbreak



Troy R. Bennett | BDN

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Traffic on the Maine Turnpike has fallen drastically — by about half — in recent days. Meanwhile, the Maine Turnpike Authority has sent most staff home, but is planning to continue construction for now.

Turnpike Authority Executive Director Peter Mills said regular auto commuters seem to make up the bulk of the decline in traffic, as more people are either working from home or not working at all.

Mills said much of the remaining traffic is trucks that are moving goods from warehouses to stores or from out-of-state companies into Maine.

Because of that, he said turnpike revenue is not down as much as vehicle counts are.

Mills said only about a quarter of the turnpike's staff is currently working. Mills, who was working from the turnpike's headquarters in Portland, said it "is essentially a ghost town," with only about 15 people on the job, down from more than 100 most weekdays.

For now, turnpike employees, whether at work or not, are being paid.

"We made a commitment to do it for two weeks," Mill said.

While Mills said he's not sure what will happen after that, "the first priority of this organization is to retain our workforce."

Nonetheless, construction work is continuing. Mills said this week the authority is likely to approve the first phase of a widening project in Greater Portland. It will add a third lane in each direction from the Interstate 295 exit in Scarborough into South Portland.

Mills said decisions can be made this fall and winter on the second and third phases of the widening project.

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