

Commentary

Views on Widening the Maine Turnpike

Convenience, necessity, and fairness: Some questions about widening the turnpike

Maine Policy Review (1997). Volume 6, Number 2

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The turnpike is a critical transportation artery for Maine and its future is a major public issue. Today it looks very much like the turnpike's thirty-mile stretch south of South Portland will be widened. Yet a number of issues associated with this course of action remain unexplored or unresolved. In this commentary, I pose a set of questions related to the issue of the turnpike widening and provide some personal, perhaps curmudgeonly answers. I think serious public discussion of these questions is needed. I offer my own views as a catalyst.

What will widening bring us?

Fifteen years, or less, of convenience. Never in history has congestion been eliminated by widening roads. Temporarily the situation is abated, but new floods of traffic soon create new gridlocks—with an end result of more cars idling on the roadway than before. The study by Vanasse Hangen, Brustlin, Inc. (VHB) notes that "by the year 2015, service levels on a widened turnpike will be as bad as they are now" (p. 93). The "experts" then will renew their suggestion for a fourth lane. Does this sound like a "solution"—or a "treadmill"?

Will widening benefit the overall economy?

The VHB study presents model results claiming 11,000 new jobs by the year 2010 (p. 114). Whether these jobs appear in reality is debatable. They are almost all in the tourism sector, which is not likely to benefit much from relieving peak-period congestion. It will take much more evidence to show that widening would have a detectable effect on Maine's economy.

Who will benefit from widening?

There is little chance that tourism statewide will benefit in any meaningful way from widening the turnpike. On peak traffic weekends, every beach, boat launch, parking lot, and resort area already is overcrowded to the point of frustration and loss of enjoyment for most visitors. Businesses shipping out-of-state will not benefit greatly, either. Their trucks will breeze down the turnpike, through New Hampshire, and then slow to a crawl in the gridlock of the Boston-New York metro area.

On the other hand, widening will reduce the legendary congestion on Route 1 south of Portland, where the turnpike will become the preferred route for many short trips. Within that corridor, then, the widening will improve the quality of life for nearly everyone—local residents, commuters, and the area's tourism industry.

The other winners would be the commuters, whose workday trips would be quicker and more trouble-free. Some could even abandon those inconvenient van pools and car pools and drive to work alone, as is already done by the other 90 percent of motorists.

Why should commuters be subsidized?

Commuters are subsidized by rate breaks on their commuter passes. They also are subsidized by free parking at malls and at their work places. The Maine Turnpike Authority has kindly prepared a rough estimate of revenue lost to the commuter passes. It comes to nearly \$4 million per year². This is 80 percent of the authority's current debt-service bill.

Why should testing congestion pricing be illegal?

The authority has tried to work within the Sensible Transportation Act and to make a good-faith field test of whether congestion pricing can be made to work, but the Legislature stamped out this notion in a minute. The truth is, we already have congestion pricing. It's just the wrong kind. With commuter passes and free parking, we are subsidizing congestion. Resort owners and their lobbyists claim congestion pricing would cost them business and damage the economy. These people use it themselves on their own customers—check their rate cards.

How many people will really get there faster?

Once it is widened, the turnpike will be the only significant stretch of pavement in the Northeast with no congestion. Tourists and commuters will breeze along as fast as watching state troopers will tolerate. High capacity will encourage sharper and higher traffic peaks. When drivers at these times transfer onto already overcongested urban and rural arterials, gridlock will result. Many motorists will discover that their total travel time will change little. On many roads, motorists not even using the turnpike will suffer. The only exception will be the Route 1 corridor.

Is there a safety issue?

Yes. Accident rates are higher on the four-lane section than on the six-lane section. VHB found that about 25 percent of the accidents at high-accident locations were congestion-related. The number of lanes is not the only factor. No estimates were prepared to show how accidents would decline after the widening, though it seems likely that they will. However, it has not been shown that widening is the only, or even the cheapest, way to achieve reductions in the number of accidents.

Can we avoid traffic management?

Traffic management is characterized alternatively as "fascism" (an actual quote from a well-known business organization), or derided as a wooly academic notion that would never work (by politicians and transportation officials in the business of subsidizing congestion). Very soon, our major cities and suburbs will be compelled to take action to maintain mobility as rising numbers of single-occupant cars crawl around ever more slowly.

What are our priorities?

Would widening the turnpike be convenient? No question. The 90 percent of commuters who drive alone in their vehicles would continue to do so on a virtually uncongested roadway—until 2015. They could pass on a large part of the bill to others. Then, we'd build a fourth lane when

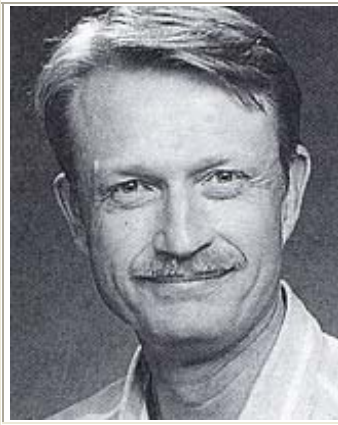
congestion returned. What could be more convenient? Is widening necessary? Only if it is in some sense necessary that all these drivers be able to drive alone in their cars any time they please while passing on much of the cost to others.

We can no longer afford to wave aside the question of priorities. We won't tolerate mandatory automobile inspection to cut pollution; some drivers won't even tolerate reformulated gasoline. As a matter of practical politics today, it looks like Maine motorists are willing to spend \$100 million for fifteen years of commuter convenience, but not a cent for clean air. Legislators and editorial writers are making judgments based on unexamined myths and outright falsehoods. What are our priorities, anyway?

ENDNOTES

1. The Vanasse Hangen, Brustlin, Inc. (VHB), Maine Turnpike Alternatives Study was completed in 1996 and commissioned by the Maine Turnpike Authority.

2. Dan Paradee, personal communication, 1997.



Lloyd C. Irland wrote the Mainewatch report on the Maine Turnpike in 1988 that helped Spark a re-examination of the widening issue. He served on the advisory committee for the Maine Turnpike Authority's congestion pricing study. Irland currently is president of the Irland Group, a consulting firm in Winthrop.

Full cite: Irland, Lloyd. 1997. *Safety and economics: Key reasons for widening the turnpike*. Vol. 6(2): 59-61.