

127th Legislature
Senate of
Maine
Senate District 34

RECEIVED DEP-SER
2017 MAY 10 A 10:00

Senator Ron Collins
3 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333-0003
(207) 287-4884

April 28, 2017

MaryBeth Richardson, Hearing Officer
Maine Department of Environmental Protection
312 Canco Road
Portland, ME 04103

RE: York Toll Plaza Project

Dear Ms. Richardson,

Please consider this letter as you deliberate on the permit applications filed by the Maine Turnpike Authority (MTA) to replace its barrier toll plaza at Mile 7.3 with an Open Road Tolling (ORT) plaza at Mile 8.8 in York. As you will see, I support the MTA's proposed project.

I represent Senate District 34, which encompasses Acton, Kennebunk, Lebanon, North Berwick, part of Berwick, and Wells. I have served 15 years in the Maine Legislature, all of them on the Transportation Committee, and the last seven years as Senate Chair. As a life-long Wells resident and a long-time business owner and public official, I can tell you first-hand how important the Maine Turnpike is to the economic and social well-being of all of Maine and particularly York County.

The Turnpike provides a primary means of travel to the region's citizens, business patrons, and visitors. It allows travelers who want to pass through the region to do so safely and effectively, which reduces traffic volumes on state and local roads including Routes 1, 9, and 109. My district has a robust tourism-based economy that is dependent upon reliable transportation infrastructure that serves the needs of year-round residents and visitors alike. I am fully involved in Maine transportation policy and understand the needs of the Maine Turnpike in southern Maine in particular. A safe, modern, and well-maintained turnpike is vitally important to all of Maine. It is with that knowledge and background that I urge you to allow the MTA to proceed with its proposed ORT plaza at Mile 8.8 for the reasons below.

The current barrier plaza at Mile 7.3 is a disgraceful gateway to Maine. It is old, substandard, and needs replacing. It is sinking into soft soils, has a leaky tunnel, and outdated toll equipment held together with used parts. It is located on a curve near on and off ramps, which makes for weaving and accidents. Perhaps most importantly, the current plaza does not have modern, open highway speed electronic tolling that travelers now expect and deserve. New Hampshire travelers have enjoyed the benefits of highway speed tolling in Hampton for 10 years, yet Maine is still waiting.

The delay is primarily due to a relatively small number of York citizens (Think Again) and the Town of York. Think Again, was formed many years ago when some residents of York were alarmed by some early conceptual toll plaza alternatives that took homes or had extensive resource impacts. Those early alternatives were quickly rejected by the MTA and regulators years ago.

The MTA's current proposed ORT plaza at Mile 8.8 will be a huge improvement and has minimal impacts. E-ZPass customers will enjoy the convenience of cruising through three, high-speed ORT lanes in each direction which will provide a much more welcoming gateway to Maine. Further, safety will be greatly improved due to modern design and better visibility on a straight stretch on the top of a hill. Environmentally, I understand that air quality will improve, noise will be reduced, and wetland impacts are minimal. Further, abutter impacts are small. No homes are displaced and there are no takings of property by eminent domain.

The opposition that continues today is hard to understand. It appears to be caused by opponent's' singular focus on stopping any relocation of the plaza, regardless of consequences. The group first opposed replacement of the existing plaza and supported rehabilitation, citing the cost of the new plaza. They later supported a new replacement ORT plaza near the existing plaza site, even though it would have cost \$20 million (or 50%) more. When that option was properly rejected for safety, environmental and cost concerns, the group shifted to supporting All Electronic Tolling (AET). Over the years, opponents have asked for and understandably received participation of legislators who represent York, who in turn may have communicated with MaineDEP regarding the application process.

I respect the rights of citizens to petition their elected officials. However, I respectfully request that you and all MaineDEP staff recognize that this opponent group and their York legislators do not represent the other 183 Maine State Senators and Representatives or the people they represent. In fact, over the last decade, I have seen few if any people outside the Town of York oppose this project. The most common questions I hear have been, "What's the hold-up? When will it be built?" This is a project with statewide interest, and I know you will consider all perspectives.

ORT preserves the collection of cash for those that need or want it in a manner that is safe, fair, and fiscally prudent. It is a proven technology that works in Maine. There are already four Turnpike ORT plazas that are complete or under construction. AET, the latest rationale of the local opponents, cause large numbers of free riders, higher tolls, a large back office operation for bill collection, and traffic diversion on state and local roads including Routes 1, 9, and 109. The toll increases are on former cash customers, who often have lower incomes, making an AET toll structure more regressive. AET also causes many first-time visitors to receive a bill in the mail after their visit, which could leave lasting negative impressions.

Further, I respectfully observe that the business decision on how to collect tolls on the Maine Turnpike is best left to the MTA. It is hard to understand how this decision should be influenced by opponents or is within the jurisdiction of environmental regulators. Of course, fair consideration of alternatives is required, but it appears that the MTA has exhaustively documented its extensive and fair consideration of AET. Why isn't that the end of the matter, especially given the minimal environmental impacts?

The State of Maine needs modern highway speed tolling in York in a manner that does not create large numbers of free riders, does not raise tolls, and does not cause traffic diversion. The MTA's proposed ORT plaza meets these requirements; AET and a refurbished barrier plaza does not. This project has been extensively analyzed for years and the people of Maine deserve it. For all of these reasons, I support the MTA's applications and urge you to allow the MTA to move forward as proposed.

Sincerely,



Senator Ron Collins, Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Transportation