

AN ACHIEVABLE VISION: SEVEN STEPS TO IMPLEMENTING BETTER EAST-WEST TRANSPORTATION IN  
MAINE

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Maine Chamber and Business Alliance

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Last week, we heard the results of an analysis of the potential economic benefits that could be realized with improved east-west highway travel in Maine. The study provided a tremendous body of information and many insights on improving transportation links with Canada. While there is no doubt that additional research and analysis would reveal additional useful information, I am of the view that it is time to get on with the business of improving Maine's east-west connections.

With that determination, it's time to shift the discussion from "what should we do?" to "how should we go about doing it?"

It is clear from the studies that considerable economic benefits would accrue to the State by improving our links to Canada and in particular the growing markets of Montreal and Toronto. I am therefore proposing a seven-step approach that will achieve that desired result through improvements to Maine's transportation system. The highway component will emphasize the corridor running from the Maine/New Brunswick border at Calais northwesterly to the Maine/Quebec border at Coburn Gore. The scope and timing of improvements will be governed by performance standards we shall meet that address desired travel speed, level of congestion, and safety. As this east-west highway is upgraded over time, sufficient right-of-way will be acquired to create the opportunity for the future expansion of these corridors to four lanes as the need arises

These seven steps are not necessarily consecutive. In fact, the more successful we can be at making them concurrent, the quicker we'll have the better east-west access we deserve, we need and we want.

The first step is simply protecting something we already have and making selected improvements to assure it remains valuable to us. Presently, Route 9, "The Airline" from Calais to Brewer includes the longest, free-flowing, 55-mph arterial highway in the State of Maine. That's a great starting point for improved east-west travel, but to meet tomorrow's needs, it will require additional improvements, including better access at either end and greater protection for what's in between.

Our strategy for this section of Maine's east-west link has four parts. The first is construction of a new international border crossing in the Calais-St. Stephen area within the next five years to improve the flow of cross-border traffic. Discussions with the Province of New Brunswick, customs officials, and others from both countries are already well underway.

On the other end of The Airline, we need to begin the environmental assessment and preliminary engineering work needed to build a new limited-access, two-lane roadway connecting I-395 in Brewer to Route 9 in the Eddington area. While initially built as two lanes, the planning for this route should include sufficient right-of-way for four lanes, preserving our options for future growth. Ideally, the design of this alignment should benefit not only the Brewer-Eddington corridor, but also the Brewer-Ellsworth Route 1A Corridor, with access to Acadia and the US Route 1 Corridor east of Ellsworth to Machias and beyond. Funding for the environmental and engineering effort is already available so we should move forward with a goal of beginning construction within five years.

Between Calais and Brewer, we need to protect the existing corridor against further encroachment. We do that by buying the necessary right-of-way and development rights to limit access and other actions that could, if left unchecked, degrade the quality and function of that roadway. These acquisitions will also provide land for additional lanes as they are needed in the future.

The final step in The Airline component is completion of ongoing reconstruction by the year 2002. This involves two projects presently under construction and just three remaining reconstruction projects. Funding for these three projects is included in the November transportation bond issue. To the extent possible, these three projects will be designed and built as limited-access highways.

The second step in our east-west initiative is targeted at Central Maine. We need to begin an environmental assessment and preliminary engineering study to determine the feasibility of a two-lane, limited access highway connecting I-95 in the Pittsfield-Burnham area to US Route 2 west of Norridgewock. In taking this approach, we need to concentrate on getting sufficient right-of-way for expansion to four lanes in the future. I plan to ask the Congressional Delegation to seek the additional federal funding needed to make this project a reality. It should also be noted that construction of this corridor needs to complement ongoing plans for a new Kennebec River Bridge in Skowhegan.

Because I intend this to be a truly "One Maine" initiative, the third step in this plan is a statewide accelerated upgrading of all of Maine's remaining substandard arterial highway corridors, a total of 396 miles of highway. I plan to ask the upcoming Legislature for authorization to undertake and complete this work in ten years. The east-west arterial highways to be covered by this concentrated effort are: Route 1 from Calais to Ellsworth, Route 1A from Ellsworth to Brewer, Route 2 from Newport to Gilead, Route 6 from Lincoln to Abbot, Route 26 from Gray to Bethel, Route 27 from Farmington to Coburn Gore, Route 201 from Skowhegan to the Canadian border, and Route 201A from Norridgewock to North Anson. But, in addition to these highways, improvements will also be made to other regionally important arterials such as Route 1 in the St. John River Valley, Routes 25 and 302 in Western Maine, Route 4 in Franklin County, and Route 1 in the mid-coast.

In addition to our arterial highway corridors, three segments on our major collector road system provide important east-west connections. The fourth step in our overall strategy must be giving priority to those collectors. I speak specifically of Route 6 from Vanceboro to Lincoln, Route 16 from Abbot to Bingham, and Route 26 from Newry to Upton. Improvements to those corridors can be made through MDOT's Collector Road Program if we agree that they are the priority needs for that program.

The remaining three initiatives are not traditional highway projects. But they all can have large impacts on east-west transportation in Maine, either by providing an alternative to existing east-west travel, or by improving the existing east-west corridors by removing some of the existing traffic volume.

The first of these, and the fifth step in our overall plan, is the rehabilitation of the Calais Branch Rail Line. This will establish an effective, efficient non-highway transportation alternative to Hancock and Washington Counties, and, if possible, to the Port of Eastport. Phase 1 of these improvements is included in the November transportation bond package.

The second non-highway initiative, the sixth step in our overall plan, is also part of the November bond issue. It calls for the state to purchase the remainder of the Lewiston Lower Rail Line and construct a Lewiston/Auburn rail connection. That connection will provide a new, exciting link between what traditionally has been two separate rail systems in Maine. That link will open rail access from Lewiston, Brunswick, Augusta and Rockland to the St. Lawrence and Atlantic Railroad, which, in turn, provides connections to continuous service to Vancouver, Chicago, Mexico, the Gulf Ports and Halifax. Funds for right-of-way acquisition and preliminary engineering to build such a connection are included in the November transportation bond package.

The final rail initiative, the final step in our seven-step package, is upgrading the Canadian Atlantic Rail Corridor between Brownville and Jackman. Two million dollars in funding for this effort is included in the November transportation bond package. Completion of this work will ensure the continued availability of a modern, efficient rail line to serve east-west rail traffic to and from Maine to Montreal and St. John.

With all due apologies to Stephen Covey and his Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, we now have before us seven steps to effective east-west travel in Maine. Anyone who has truly tried to adopt Covey's method will tell you that success or failure rests in your ability to change the way you think about doing what you do.

I would suggest the same is true with the success of east-west travel in Maine. We now have the advantage of knowing the potential economic benefits of a variety of possible east-west alternatives. Let's keep the discussion going, but at the same time get about the business of reaping those benefits.