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Midcoast Bypass Task Force Meeting Minutes, December 9, 2008

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Minutes of December 9, 2008 Task Force Meeting

Midcoast Bypass Task Force Meeting

October 29, 2008; 6:30-8:30 pm

Lincoln County Communications Conference Room

Attending: David King Sr., Woolwich; Bob Faunce, Lincoln County; Tom Eichler, Sheepscot Valley Conservation Assn; Don Jones, Wiscasset; Bill Curtis, Wiscasset; David Nichols, Wiscasset; David Bertran, Westport Island; Doug Baston, Alna; Pat Hudson, Newcastle; Jo Cameron, Edgecomb; Dick Thomas, Chewonki Foundation; Kat Fuller, MaineDOT; Gerry Audibert, MaineDOT; Ed Hanscom, MaineDOT; Peter Kleskovic, FHWA; Carol Morris, Morris Communications.

The meeting began at 6:33 pm.

Handouts

Gerry handed out a revised report and reviewed the Action Items regarding Downtown Village Traffic Management, noting that MaineDOT will talk to the Town of Wiscasset about hiring a crossing guard and that MaineDOT will also talk to the communities and Chambers about the potential impact of a sign on I-295 informing travelers who are heading north of Belfast of Exit 113 to Rte. 3. He also stated that the bicycle/pedestrian path will be addressed as part of a study Bob Faunce is undertaking. A MaineDOT representative will be in contact with Wiscasset and other communities to discuss new potential Park and Ride locations as well as publicizing these.

Carol said that she would be sending the revised matrix that details the actions taken and Task Force position out to the TF with the minutes of tonight's meeting. She asked the TF to make sure they were in agreement with the document, and if not, to note that via email.

Gerry reviewed the Edgecomb Routes 1 and 27 crash summary.

Gerry stated that Bob's suggestion of an island and northbound turning lane at the intersection of Route 27 with Route 1 in Wiscasset will be implemented; two possible designs are being considered. It will go into the funding queue for possible funding in 2009 for the FY10-11 biennium.

Gerry briefly described the changeable message sign final report, noting that he will be meeting with stakeholders to determine at what speed the message would be posted. The plan is to make decisions in February with a goal of implementing for peak tourist season.

Gerry stated that the application to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was submitted on Dec. 8 and that the cover letter states that N2A-1 remains the preferred route by MaineDOT and the communities. The cover letter also notes that increased land acquisition costs could make the cost of all three remaining alternatives the same. The cover letter and application was handed out.

Carol stated that anyone interested in receiving the full report that accompanied the application should let her know. Dave suggested that each town should receive one copy. Tom Eichler stated that SVCA would like a copy as well, and Bob Faunce requested one for Lincoln County. It was decided that a copy should be in all town offices (Boothbay Harbor, Boothbay, Edgecomb, Newcastle, Alna, Wiscasset, Westport Island, Woolwich).

MaineDOT Update

Kat Fuller stated that MaineDOT was ordered by the Governor to cut its budget by 10%. Based on projections, MaineDOT is \$0.5 billion short for achieving all projects. She stated that the federal stimulus package will focus on projects that are already fully planned and ready to build.

Kat stated that an aggressive bond request was submitted to the Governor, and if he approves it, it will go to the Legislature and then to the voters. There is a placeholder in the budget that will allow MaineDOT to begin purchasing rights of way for the bypass. It is not known whether this placeholder will survive the budget process.

Kat noted that MaineDOT does not have the funding needed to implement all existing projects, and they will be making recommendations to the Legislature. Around the state, MaineDOT is talking to communities about priorities, particularly in terms of bypasses vs. maintenance needs. Kat suggested that those present at the meeting could email her so that she can relay their input to legislators. Although the Wiscasset project is high priority, it may be somewhat lower than similar projects with year-round impact. Carol will email all task force members, asking them to get their input to Kat. Kat's understanding of the federal stimulus dollars is that they will be used for construction of projects that are already fully designed. It is expected that \$60-300 million will come to Maine. Currently MaineDOT has \$250 million in projects that are ready to go to construction bid immediately, in contrast to the Wiscasset bypass, which is not yet designed. Federal funding of those projects could free up local dollars for projects like the Wiscasset bypass. Individuals may wish to contact their congressional delegation regarding the need for funding infrastructure in Maine.

Army Corps of Engineers Process and Timing

Gerry stated that the Army Corps of Engineers will determine the Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative (LEDPA) and may hold a public meeting to solicit input. They will have a public comment period. Gerry reviewed the Army Corps process, which has an overall timeframe of as much as eight months.

Bob asked Carol to email task force members when the public comment period opens. As well, MaineDOT provided a mailing list of abutters, community members, and task force members, but it was noted that some of the task force members have changed, so Carol will be sure to let the task force know.

Peter Kleskovic described the major significance of the LEDPA decision. He noted that the Army Corps is not bound by the preferred alternative recommended by MaineDOT and the communities, and he stated that during the public comment period, communities must make clear which

alternative they are supporting and why. He clarified the fact that the Army Corps is involved due to the major presence of wetlands, not just the river.

Tom questioned the use of the word "vehemently" in the cover letter, and Jo Cameron said that it was appropriate to describe the opinion of Edgecomb.

Bob asked whether there is an appeal process once the LEDPA decision is made. Kat stated that there is no appeal process that she is aware of. Kat stated that the Army Corps will weigh all the data, and if they make a decision that does not align with the public preference, they will thoroughly document the reason for that decision. She noted that Army Corps decisions are weighted to favor natural environment.

Carol asked whether the work done by the task force in soliciting public comment would make the Army Corps less likely to hold a public hearing. The answer to this is unclear.

David Bertram asked what percentage of projects is decided against a MaineDOT recommendation, and Kat replied that nearly all projects are approved in accordance with MaineDOT recommendations.

Rte. 218 Options

Carol presented a decision/discussion matrix for Route 218 options. She recommended that the task force review it on an alternative-by-alternative basis and then vote on the preferred option.

Don Jones asked that the N2a-1 alignment interchange options be discussed first.

Bob asked whether any of the options raise any safety concerns due to proximity of interchanges (between a proposed interchange at Rte. 218 and a proposed interchange at Rte. 27.) Ed Hanscom described the federal AASHTO standards for interchange design. Peter noted that any time an access is added to a road, a potential safety issue exists, but that if the design standards are followed, safety issues are minimized. Bob reiterated his concerns about the interchange. Peter noted that the proposed proximity of entrance and exit would not be allowed on an interstate road but is allowable here due to the lower speed limit. Doug Baston asked what the criteria are for overriding the AASHTO standards. Peter explained that it is a weighing process with multiple criteria and engineering judgment. FHWA indicated that some of the interchange options may require a "design exception" in order to meet AASHTO requirements, given the close proximity of ramps between the Route 27 and Route 218 interchanges.

Don stated that Wiscasset desires a full interchange at Rte. 218 and is in favor of either of the two options presented.

Peter noted that N2A-1 Alternate Full Interchange option would need to be built more expensively to be safe, to design the on and off ramps at different elevations ("braided" interchange), thus the cost estimated may not be accurate - it may be quite a bit higher, which would change the number of years required for payback (years to recover cost).

David B. asked what the acceptable "payback period" is for the state. Ed stated that there is no specific acceptable payback period. Don Jones stated that in other options MaineDOT has accepted payback times of up to 34 years, and Ed agreed.

Carol and Don both noted concern on the numbers presented. Ed noted that the Oct. 23 memo is based on all traffic, and the Dec. 2 memo is based on truck traffic only. Gerry reiterated the Town of Wiscasset's desire to legally close Federal St. in Wiscasset to trucks, but that this can only be done on Local Roads.

The Task Force reviewed the numbers presented on all full and half interchanges to make sure they understood MaineDOT's assumptions.

Ed then put up the map of the non-interchange options and reviewed where each would go and what kind of construction or changes would need to be made for implementation.

Bob stood up and went to the front to review the map of the Inner Route and noted that it solves all of the problems connected with emergency vehicle access as well as providing full access to the bypass from both Rte. 218 and Rte. 27. Doug asked why its benefit assessment was so low, when it appears to be a strong solution. Ed explained that because of the truck vs. all-vehicle analysis, it was not really an-apples-to-apples comparison, but that MaineDOT felt the inner connector was a good option. Dave B. noted that it was also relatively low cost at only \$800,000. He stated that he thought it was a brilliant solution.

David King noted that Woolwich has no stake in the Rte. 218 interchange, but stated that as a business person he believes that N2A-1 should truly be a bypass and not an economic development corridor as the Topsham connector has turned out to be.

Don requested that MaineDOT prepare a drawing that shows clearly how this interchange would work as the sketch does not clearly show a full interchange. Doug noted that this solution could be constructed in stages, first as a connector from Rte. 218 to Rte. 27 and then, if needed, as an interchange onto the bypass. He added his support to this solution because it has less impact on secondary development (development that is caused by building of new roads or intersections.) Don noted that towns still have control over development through zoning.

David Nichols described Wiscasset's current ordinance restricting truck traffic. Gerry noted the research he had done on this, and said he was unaware that Wiscasset had an ordinance in place on this issue. There was discussion of the legality of the ordinance, and it appears that in order to make the ordinance legal in terms of transportation law, a public process would have had to be conducted, asking both affected residents and the trucking industry what their opinions are regarding the posting of Federal St. MaineDOT would also have to approve the ordinance. The situation is confusing, and Gerry will be in touch with Wiscasset directly for clarification.

There was discussion of the safety issue behind the desire for a bypass; that is, the ability for emergency vehicles (police, fire, ambulance) to have quick access off of Rte. 218 during peak traffic season.

Bob motioned that the task force support the inner route, and plan it to allow for a full interchange eventually. David seconded the motion. The inner route is defined as a connector between 27 and 218.

Don stated that he would like to see a complete design.

Doug suggested that the motion be amended to reflect this.

Dave N. stated he would like to see a drawing before he votes; that he cannot vote on something that is not clear to him.

Bob noted that this is the last task force meeting.

David B. noted that this is a concept, and it was always understood that the designs would change and develop over time.

Carol reminded everyone that the final design would also be subject to a public process.

David K. noted that the task force is voting on a concept, not on specifics, and that the motion should be voted on.

Carol suggested amended language to the motion:

Proposed: A connector road from Rte. 218 to Rte. 27 to be integrated with a full Route 27 bypass interchange.

Bob withdraw his earlier motion and proposed the new motion.

David B. seconded. Carol called for discussion.

Don called for an amendment to the motion to add: that will provide access to and from Rte. 218 north and south on bypass.

The new motion read: A connector road from Rte. 218 to Rte. 27 to be integrated with a full Route 27 bypass interchange that will provide access to and from Rte. 218 north and south on bypass.

The motion passed with 10 in favor, one abstaining.

David B. motioned that Ed Hanscom cannot retire from MaineDOT until the bypass is built.

The Task Force voted unanimously in favor.

Carol reiterated that everyone would be receiving notice from her over the next months regarding the Army Corps process and the MaineDOT/legislative budget process. The notice would give each member and/or community the opportunity to weigh in again on the bypass decision and funding.

The meeting ended at 8:40 pm.