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## Midcoast Bypass Task Force Meeting Minutes, September 18, 2008

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## Minutes of September 18, 2008 Task Force Meeting

Midcoast Bypass Task Force Meeting  
September 18, 2008; 6:30-8:30 pm  
Wiscasset Town Office

Attending: David King Sr., Woolwich; Bob Faunce, Lincoln County; Tom Eichler, Sheepscot Valley Conservation Assn; Don Jones, Wiscasset; Arthur Faucher, Wiscasset; Doug Baston, Alna; David Bertran, Westport Island; Pat Hudson, Newcastle; Jaimie Logan, Boothbay Harbor Region Chamber of Commerce; Jo Cameron, Edgcomb; Amanda Russell, Edgcomb; Gerry Audibert, MaineDOT; Ed Hanscom, MaineDOT; Peter Kleskovic, FHWA, Carol Morris, Morris Communications.

Carol Morris opened the meeting by explaining the format and information regarding interchanges that was provided in the mailed packet of information Task Force members has received. She added that within the next two weeks, members will receive updated information on Interim Downtown Traffic for discussion at the next meeting.

Task force members opted not to hear a presentation on the packet of information but to move right into questions. The first discussion was on the Ed Hanscom's analysis of the full interchange options in Wiscasset for Rte. 27 under the N2a alternative.

Bob Faunce: On the full diamond, the analysis missed the impact on the school - you have an entrance and exit to the school right on the southbound on ramp - traffic will be going south on Rte. 27, turning onto the on ramp, which will interfere with the school entrance. There should be a crosswalk there, because there is a sidewalk on the other side. People including children will be crossing there, and it will be dangerous.

Doug Baston: Since Wiscasset is considering consolidating three schools into two schools, that school could get bigger.

Bob: I would not recommend that ramp in that location, it's too close.

Ed Hancom: Rte. 27 is raised in this area, and there would be consolidation of the driveway activity in the northern driveway, because of the steep grade.

Bob: Where would the kids cross?

Don Jones: I think there's a crosswalk there now, near the Morris farm.

Gerry Audibert: I think there is a crosswalk there.

Don: I think there's one there, and there's one near the community center, and one up higher by the high school.

Don: The town's position has been that we prefer a full interchange on Rte. 27 as opposed to a half interchange. It appears that the half diamond with the DEIS ramps is the best of the alternatives. Wiscasset's school population has dropped by 1/3, from 1200 to 700. With three schools, we have a lot of extra school space. On Nov. 3 we will vote on whether to close one of the schools and upgrade another at a large cost. The architects have done preliminary designs for the primary school and have reconfigured the entrances and exits, but they haven't thought about them in terms of an elevated Rte. 27, so they would have to adjust their designs. Both the middle school and the primary school are being considered for closure, and designs are subject to change.

Doug: At the primary school, going to the northern drive would be a reconfiguration of the school, which would be a cost to the town.

Don: The architect's design is to create a flow pattern around the school while separating deliveries and bus traffic from parents dropping off their children.

Doug: It's probably true that the architects have not thought about this in their planning.

Bob: The DEIS plus two ramps solves that problem because it eliminates the ramps near the school. The 2 ramps plus DEIS has a 34 year cost to recover, which adds \$1 million onto the cost. If you're trying to get full access to Rte. 27, it's only \$200,000 more.

Carol: The real difference is the annual Vehicle Mile Traveled cost. The two ramps adds Vehicle Miles Traveled. With this option, you're asking people to drive more, spend more money.

Don: I like both options that create a full interchange. I'm not in favor of the full diamond configuration, and the numbers don't support it. The town has been so concerned that we have a full interchange, I would support the one that is more likely to be built. I would prefer the first one (DEIS version plus 2 ramps), but the other one saves vehicle miles, cost less and has a shorter payback.

Doug: Does MDOT or federal guidelines have a cutoff point? Do you invest in 34-year projects?

Ed: It's a tradeoff between transportation benefit and environmental impact, and then there's the issue of full access on Rte. 27, which the interchange would address, as well as the through traffic through Wiscasset.

Doug: Realizing that it's a balancing act, do you have a cutoff point?

Ed: The longer the payback, the less attractive it is. There's not a hard and fast payback; it's a judgment point.

Carol: The original DEIS proposal had a payback of 30 years; one would assume that that is an acceptable level of cost/benefit.

Don: MDOT is willing to put in a set of ramps that has a 30-year payback, but the town wants a full interchange, so the longer payback may make sense.

Gerry: The cost differential between the two off-turns is \$200,000. If we do decide to have a full interchange, it's going to add about \$1 million. We want to select something at the lowest cost we can, but there are other factors as well.

Ed: We have been trying to address community concerns on the location of the interchange.

Don: The cost differences are quite small, so other factors will rise to the top as far as decision-making.

Gerry: It's an additional \$1 million.

Peter Kleskovic: From a highway engineer standpoint, I like this design (DEIS plus 2 ramps) as well as the diamond. We typically don't like to have things split up. These two seem to be cleaner from an engineering standpoint. One of the things about the split diamond is that it has the highest amount of wetland impact. The full diamond has lower wetland impact, along with the full interchange up north.

Don: One has the most vernal pool impact, one has the most stream impact, and one has the most pedestrian impact. Obviously you don't want the one with the most pedestrian impact. We should not proceed with the assumption that the primary school will be retained. There is a lot of disagreement in Wiscasset, between the selectmen and the school board. There will be a vote in November.

Bob: It's fair to say that the school will not be razed if they close it, it will have a different use.

Arthur Faucher: It could be like the veterans' facility in Bangor.

Ed: To go through a 4F property (a school is a 4F property, which is protected by federal law), we would need to show that there's no feasible and prudent alternative.

Peter: Under these circumstances, it would be fair to say that these would not be major issues (meaning impediments to taking). (See NOTE below for clarification.)

Ed: The playground would still be there, even if the school was closed.

NOTE: Schools are not automatically extended 4(f) protection. They can have 4(f) protection if they are judged to be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. The playground of a school could be considered for 4(f) protection if it is open to the public and has substantial after hours recreational activity.

Excerpt from FHWA Section 4(f) Policy Paper

#### 10. School Playgrounds

Question: Are publicly owned school playgrounds subject to the requirements of Section 4(f)?

Answer: While the primary purpose of public school playgrounds is for structured physical education classes and recreation for students, these properties may also serve significant public recreational purposes and as such, may be subject to Section 4(f) requirements. When a playground serves only school activities and functions, the playground is not considered subject to Section 4(f). However, when a public school playground is open to the public and serves either organized or substantial "walk-on" recreational purposes, it is subject to the requirements of Section 4(f) if the playground is determined to be significant for recreational purposes (see also Question 2 B). In

determining the significance of the playground facilities, there may be more than one official having jurisdiction over the facility. A school official is considered to be the official having jurisdiction of the land during school activities. However, the school board may have authorized the city park and recreation department or a public organization to control the facilities after school hours. The actual function of the playground is the determining factor under these circumstances. Therefore, documentation should be obtained from the officials having jurisdiction over the facility stating whether or not the playground is of local significance for recreational purposes.

Arthur: If the primary school closes, the town would move the playground and put it in another area. If the school closed tomorrow, how would that affect the options?

Gerry: It would make the decision easier. With the half diamond, we wouldn't have pedestrian issues.

Tom Eichlar: Would it help to put the sidewalk on the other side of Rte. 27 (the west side), so you wouldn't have to cross Rte. 27? Would that address anyone's concerns?

Carol: I think you would then have the ramps interfering with the sidewalk.

Don: It would make it worse, because you would have people switching sides.

Dave King: If you move the sidewalk, then somehow you have to cross Rte. 27. If you have crosswalks, it's going to stop traffic, which negates the whole purpose. Would it be possible to have a walkway under the ramps?

Gerry: There's a 20-foot vertical difference, and that would present problems with vehicle clearance. It may be workable, but it would present challenges.

Ed: We would favor the sidewalk on the east side, where it is now.

Dave K.: I don't see how this is going to be workable if that facility remains a public facility. You're going to have to put crosswalks in a couple of places, and people will scamper across the highway anyway.

Doug: What will the speed be?

Ed: The bypass will be 45 mph and Rte. 27 is 40 mph.

Don: The crosswalk is closer to the Morris Farm.

Gerry: The crosswalk was north of the entrance to the school.

Doug: No kids walk to the primary school, but if it becomes a middle school, that will change.

Bob: Part of the consideration should be what will happen to Rte. 27 in that location. The N2a-1 creates 3 areas of conflict. If you're going to do a full service interchange, you're going to have to plan to have commercial development.

Don: You'll have to zone it so as not to have that.

Bob: On the east side of Rte. 27 north of the interchange, there will be a lot of pressure. It's similar to exit 77 north of Auburn. Auburn has had a tremendous amount of commercial development within a half mile.

Don: But there will be a lot of sentiment in Wiscasset to control growth, because that's where we have our educational campus. You've got residences, a church, a bus garage, etc.

Bob: There will be a lot of pressure in the future.

Dave K: Why wouldn't it make more sense to raise the bypass over Rte. 27 than to raise Rte 27 over the bypass?

Don: To reduce noise. That's why the bypass has been designed to be lower than the surrounding area in most cases.

Bob: The fact that you've got fairly low usage, some of those buildings could be relocated, there will be pressure. What are the estimated vehicle trips per day using that interchange?

Ed: Rte. 1 North ramps have about 1900 vehicles, South about 1100. So about 3000 cars a day. Average daily traffic on Rte. 27 is about 6000.

Don: We would prefer the first option, the one that Bob likes best, for N2a-1, we would like least the full diamond. But the half diamond we would prefer to not having a full interchange.

Doug: Is the no interchange option still on the table?

Carol: That was never such an option. It was always half or full.

Dave B: How do you get off the elevated Rte. 27 to the Morris Farm or the school?

Ed: You're very close to existing grade. A left turn lane could be done.

Dave B: Just in terms of safety, we should note there's a lot of turning into Morris Farm.

Carol: Let's move to the options for alternative N8c. There are two possibilities, one is the original half interchange ramps plus an additional half diamond. The second is a full diamond. It's a 20-year payback for the half diamond and the original ramps as opposed to 14 years for the full diamond, in terms of recovering the costs. The full diamond adds more vehicle miles for travelers - and that adds cost - but this configuration is almost \$2.2 million cheaper to build than the original proposal in the DEIS, which is why the payback is shorter. From an environmental standard, the half diamond has more environmental impact. But the full diamond takes two more residences.

Tom: Why is there a difference between the interchanges?

Gerry/Ed: The N2a alignment is sufficiently different from the N8c alignment so that we couldn't use the same design.

Don J: Looking at this from Wiscasset's point of view, there's not really much to choose. Wiscasset does not favor N8c and it's not the preferred route at the present time.

Carol: However, given that N8c is still on the table as an alternative, it would be helpful to have Wiscasset's input here.

Bob: On the N8c half diamond and DEIS ramps, it looks like the eastbound on ramp goes under the bypass, which means that the bypass will be elevated - so doesn't that have a noise impact?

Gerry: N8c is higher than the ramps at that point. If you didn't have the ramps, it would not be lower.

Ed: It's possible that it could be lower at that point.

Don: It's an awkward and undesirable design.

Carol: The full diamond has more housing impact and more environmental impact, but a significant cost reduction.

Arthur: If I were to pick I would go with the half diamond.

Bob: Why does the full diamond have more impact?

Ed: The full diamond has less stream impact.

Carol: The full diamond adds back in 5 acres of undeveloped habitat when compared to the original DEIS configuration, but it has a negative effect on vernal pools. It's not clear here as to whether that is a significant vernal pool or not.

Don: You have less operational benefit. Your annual vehicle miles traveled goes up instead of down.

Gerry: There's also an increase in vehicle miles traveled on the full diamond.

Doug: I feel that this is not anyone's preferred route, but we need to look at these more closely, because if for some reason the preferred route isn't used, we need to pay a lot more attention to the recommendation here.

Don: If N8c is chosen, I would like to see more alternatives.

Amanda Russell: If it comes back that the Army Corp of Engineers can only permit N8c, then you're slowing the whole process down. That's not right.

Don: I don't know what you're saying.

Amanda: Why aren't you looking at them closer now?

Carol: I can see why we might want to go back and looking at them again. No one seems very enthusiastic regarding either of these two choices.

Dave B: If you did pick a route, the towns will still have input on final design, won't they?

Carol: Yes, there is another public process at that point. Let me find out what the parameters would be at that level of discussion.

Don J: I think the least impact to Wiscasset in terms of N8c would be the full diamond.

Jaimie: For the full diamond, if the annual vehicle miles traveled are higher, wouldn't it be likely that the bypass would be used less?

Don: No because coming from Gardiner, you might have to go a half mile farther to enter the bypass, but Rte. 1 would be even longer.

Carol: Next we have N2f-1, which is currently a dark horse in this race. Do we want to spend time talking about it? Peter, is it a requirement?

Peter: We do not have to talk about N2f-1 -it's up to the committee.

(General decision to move on from the Committee.)

Bob: On Rte. 218, why is it so expensive? Looking at Rte. 27, even the most expensive version, looking at the 2 ramps and DEIS ramps, that totaled \$4 million. It looks like the cheapest interchange on Rte. 218 is \$7 million and it goes up to \$11 million.

Ed: For Rte. 27, we had a half interchange already included in the DEIS, so the costs reflect adding capacity for a half interchange. Since we had no interchange at Rte. 218 in the DEIS, all these costs reflect adding a full interchange. Plus, some of these have bridge costs that Rte. 27 doesn't have. For example, on N2a, you have the Polly Clark stream, and you have to build a long bridge, or even a bridge and a half over Rte. 218 and another bridge over Polly Clark stream.

Bob: Where the off ramp goes over that side road to the south of Rte. 218, there's a house there - is that house too far to be impacted?

Ed: I don't believe it would involve taking it.

Gerry: There would be impact to the driveway to the house behind it.

Bob: Maybe there will be impact to both those houses?

Dave B: What's the traffic going on and off?

Ed: For these 2 ramps (southbound), it's 700 a day; for these 2 (northbound), it's 1,000 a day. There aren't that many users.

Carol: Although the DOT has done the work on all the possibilities, we should note that this version (for the N2a alternative) is the only one that's really on the table. Wiscasset is the entity that has requested this interchange and they have stated that they do not want the N8c version. And N2f-1 is a long shot.

Dave B: What's the distance between the two interchanges?

Gerry: About  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile, maybe  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile.

Don: The key is not the distance on the bypass, but how many miles it takes to drive around to the Route 27 entrance. If you're coming down Rte. 218 and you want to get on the bypass, it's several extra miles of travel.

Gerry: We're also going to be looking at alternatives to the interchange, such as a truck route that was discussed at an earlier Task Force meeting. We are suggesting a separate meeting to talk with Wiscasset and Alna about it.

Dave B: That might be more cost-effective and it doesn't destroy a lot of stuff.

Carol: The numbers in this analysis are not promising, but certainly the Rte. 27 numbers have some viable options.

Doug: The numbers speak for themselves.

Carol: We could reconvene with just Wiscasset and Alna and take a look at some other options. Given what we see here, it's worth taking a look at other alternatives.

Pat Hudson: It would be good for Newcastle. The trucks come down from Whitefield on Rte. 218, cross the Sheepscot Road and then come down through Newcastle.

Doug: If you don't build a new road, you're just redistributing the burden.

Carol: There is going to be a lot of pressure on Rte. 218 over the next decades.

(Tom Eichlar noted that as representative of SVCA, he would like to be part of this discussion. Carol agreed to let him know when meetings would take place.)

Doug: Truck traffic waxes and wanes with the economy.

Ed: The more building, the more trucks.

Arthur: As competition diminishes, if there are fewer players, it might have a shorter lifespan.

Bob: As a town, Whitefield is one big potential gravel pit. It has tremendous untapped gravel resources. In a lot of these pits, the gravel is turning to ledge and they are quarrying that. Pike Industries in Poland had a 100-acre gravel pit, now they have a 600-acre ledge mine.

(General discussion on timing of next meeting.)

Carol: The next Bypass Task Force meeting will take place Wednesday, Oct. 29 at 6:30-8:30 pm. You will receive your packet in the next two weeks.

Don: Is there any consideration of half interchanges on 218? Those would be cheaper. Would the cost benefit look more reasonable?

Ed: I don't have that information here.

Bob: If you're trying to get trucks to use it so they can get to Boothbay, they would need the eastbound access with a new bridge.

Gerry: So the southbound traffic from Rte. 218 would continue doing what they do today.

Ed: The south oriented halves of the Rte. 218 interchange have more favorable costs than the north and east.

Carol: Ed will run calculations and we will send them out.

Doug B: We've got to talk about service roads and get interchanges off the table.

(As there were no more questions or comments from the Task Force, Carol opened the meeting to the public.)

Public 1 (Doug Fitts): Is there an updated timeline?

Carol: We will have a better sense of that at the next meeting. We may have lost a month or two, as DOT has not yet gotten the pre-application into the Army Corps. But they should be able to give their permitting recommendation to DOT by the end of this year, and then it will go to FHWA for a final decision.

Peter: The FEIS will have to be completed first.

Gerry: Yes, we submit the Army Corps application, then do most of the work completing the FEIS during the time they are evaluating the application.

Public 1: So you will have your final decision early next year.

Carol: That is still the plan.

Public 2 (Nathan Fates): At the last meeting you said the no-build plan is still on the table. When can we discuss making some simple changes on both sides of the river so we could go with that?

Carol: At the Oct. 29th meeting we'll talk about traffic changes in the downtown in order to improve traffic flow. However, the DEIS showed that the purpose and need does not appear able to be fixed by any downtown traffic measures. These will be interim measures.

Public 2: At the Newcastle meeting, Rob Nelson mentioned some specific suggestions at the last meeting on the no-build alternative. Why are we taking such large steps to mitigate problems in such a small area?

Carol: There is documentation for all the work and reasons behind what has been done on downtown traffic management. This has been discussed at length at multiple meetings. If you leave your email address, I will be happy to send you that documentation, and I urge you to attend the next meeting.

Public 2: At the last meeting, other than a couple of people, all the people from the community wanted to see something done downtown.

Bob: The idea is to do the interim improvements, and in the event that the interim improvements solve the problem, we won't have to go ahead with the bypass. All the information we have so far suggest that they won't.

The meeting ended at 8:20 pm.