



Transportation Infrastructure for Economic Development

Introductory Section

The Rural Planning Transportation Organization (RPTO) is the Aroostook region's advisory group for transportation planning and meets regularly to discuss the issues outlined in this report. It is a subcommittee of the Northern Maine Development Commission and made up of municipal managers, transportation professionals, the general public and a MaineDOT representative.

There are 2,500 miles of roadway in northern Maine, including the interstate system. New road construction has been on a steady decline and the condition of the existing roadways in northern Maine has deteriorated at an alarming rate. Houlton is the northern terminus for the Interstate 95 corridor in the United States, before it connects with the Trans-Canada Highway System (Route 2) in New Brunswick, Canada. The region's road system provides the necessary infrastructure to serve the forest products and agricultural industries, connect population centers to employment, encourage tourism, and provide access to and from Canada. These various highways also provide vital connections to the remainder of Maine, New England, and the Atlantic Provinces of Canada.

The Aroostook County Transportation Study is now in the construction phase which will be progressing over the next ten or more years as funding becomes available. The study identified four north-south corridors but did not identify an overall preferred corridor. Construction of the Caribou Bypass was completed in 2012 and the second phase Presque Isle Bypass is projected to begin construction in 2015. Phase 3 (Fort Fairfield Road to Route 1 including a new bridge over the Aroostook River) will be completed as funds become available.

While there is no true public transit service in the region, the Aroostook Regional Transportation System (ARTS) provides general public transportation. Services are provided from each town at least once a week to the nearest commercial center and available to members of the general public from the outlying towns to the commercial center and pick-up services are available in-town to the elderly and handicapped only. With the State's new "Broker/Provider" system major changes to ARTS and the services provided have occurred and there have been many complaints about the loss of service in the region by MaineCare clients. Cyr Bus Lines provides daily regional bus service from northern Maine to Bangor and points south with connections to the major national bus lines. The northern-most pick-up point for the bus line is in Caribou which means that travelers from the Saint John Valley must drive over an hour to access bus service.

The State of Maine, which purchased the former Maine Montreal and Atlantic railroad, has arranged for the Northern Maine Railroad (NMR) to operate what is left of the MMA line and is providing considerably improved service. NMR is reliably running 100-car trains four times a week.

**Transportation Infrastructure for Economic Development****Findings**

Roads and bridges have been identified as the most important transportation infrastructure and the backbone to economic development and retention in the region. There are 334 rural bridges and 17 urban bridges. 227 bridges need no improvements at this time, 43 are in need of replacement, 30 need to be widened, and 41 need to be rehabilitated. While the transportation system is extensive, it is not diverse and is being asked to serve two conflicting services, the major north-south or east-west corridor utilized by the heavy haul trucking industry to access mills and manufactures and as “Main Street” in small communities. There are 20 High Crash Locations in the region with 12 of those located in urban centers or village areas.

Many bridges were constructed in the first half of the last century, and many are reaching the end of their service lives. Through bridge maintenance activities and capital investments, MaineDOT’s objective is to achieve an average replacement age of 80 years, but based on current funding levels, these bridges would need to last an average of 180 years. Furthermore, projected bridge replacements would occur almost simultaneously; requiring a huge capital investment, or would mean weight limit postings and long detour routes.

There is no true public transit system in the region. ARTS services all Aroostook County communities at least once per week, but is heavily reliant on MaineCare and Medicare clients for its ridership; schedules typically accommodate those clients for their non-emergency trips to medical or other appointments, and less so for the general public to access employment centers.

Organized carpooling programs in the region are limited. In the past GoMaine served the Loring Commerce Centre and was utilized by employees of Sitel and Defense Finance & Accounting Services. While the program still exists (operated through the Maine Turnpike Authority), use has dwindled.

The State of Maine initiated a broker-and-provider system for MaineCare clients in late 2013. Connecticut Transportation Solutions (CTS) was awarded the brokerage with ARTS providing van and bus service. The rollout of this program was problematic with many clients reporting that trips were not available, were not dispatched, and/or payments for volunteer and “Friends and Family” programs were not made. The Maine Department of Health and Human Services is reviewing the level of service provided by CTS and will be making adjustments to the contract and/or broker.

Rail service has improved in the region since the State purchased and made significant capital improvements to the MMA line. Past complaints of rail cars only being able to travel up to 10mph have been eliminated with the installation of a higher class of line and ballast services. The NMR Company is providing a higher level of service to the region’s largest manufacturers and rail usage has increased substantially. However smaller manufacturers are still finding rail difficult to utilize as NMR cannot



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accommodate the smaller number of loads from these industries. NMR is working to provide a higher level of service to these smaller manufacturers and projects that service will improve in the future.



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Analysis and Basic Conclusions

Roads in the region generally have been rated in fair to excellent condition. The MaineDOT has continued to work through its Capital Work Plan to plan for and develop projects on roads within its jurisdiction. The current work plan contains over \$1.1 billion in projects at a statewide level and over \$103 million in Aroostook County. Locally, municipalities are having a difficult time maintaining and reconstructing roads under their jurisdiction. Most communities rate their road systems as fair to good. Towns should be developing funds and 10 year capital plans to improve the condition of roads.

The region's bridges are safe. The MaineDOT has improved documentation of bridge inspection policies and procedures, and implemented detailed recommendations addressing identified issues. The State has also responded to new quality assurance recommendations from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and adopted a new posting policy. Funds are needed for repairs and replacements to increase bridge replacements from approximately 14 per year today to between 30 and 40 per year. MaineDOT also estimates that an increase in capital investment by \$50 to \$60 million per year is needed to meet this goal. Accordingly, \$1.6 to \$1.8 billion (inflation-adjusted) in total bridge funding will be required over the next 10 years.

Public transportation needs to be increased and public awareness of available services needs to become a priority. ARTS should also work with the region's largest employers to develop schedules that accommodate employees living in outlying communities. At a minimum, ARTS should develop centralized drop off and pick up locations in the region's service centers and along transportation corridors. The development of "Park and Ride" lots should also be accomplished.

The MaineCare broker and provider system needs to be improved to ensure that clients are able to attend non-emergency medical appointments. The broker needs a far better understanding of Aroostook County, and must be able to dispatch bus service or rides in a timely manner.

An increasing Amish population in southern and central Aroostook County has created significant and often dangerous traffic conflicts. The increased use of horse and buggies and bike/pedestrian in these areas has pointed to road deficiencies. The MaineDOT and municipalities should place "Share the Road" signage at strategic locations within the community. Towns should also work with elders in the Amish community to develop a system of improving the visibility of Amish vehicles for passing motorists, through the increased use of reflectors, safety (slow moving traffic) triangles and other safety solutions.

In order to help minimize some of the issues associated with the traffic conflicts, paved shoulders should be constructed along Route 1-A, Route 2, Route 10 and other routes frequented by the Amish. A second issue, and one difficult to deal with, is the animal



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waste left along the roads sides. This waste can be dangerous to bicyclists and pedestrians along transportation corridors.



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Suggested Actions

Roads and Bridges

- Maintain and/or acquire adequate funding to maintain and upgrade existing highway and bridge infrastructure. Utilize transportation bonds as needed.
- Adequately identify heavy haul truck routes in the region. Construct heavy haul freight routes to a higher standard that accommodates this type of traffic.
- Maintain and/or upgrade minor collectors and state aid routes that are utilized to access major manufactures.
- Increase education to municipalities and public on costs and funding programs for road and bridge projects.
- Repair, construct, reconstruct, and maintain existing international bridges.
- Use transportation signage that makes motorists more aware of the possible presence of bicyclists and pedestrians on the roads.

Rail Service

- Continue to utilize the Industrial Rail Access Program IRAP program to fund essential projects in the region.
- Work with major manufacturers to develop schedules that increase shipments.
- Accommodate the smaller manufacturers that ship fewer loads, whenever feasible.
- Continue to ensure that cross border traffic can flow between Van Buren and New Brunswick.
- Continue to provide access to rail service through maintenance/preservation of rights-of-way and infrastructure.
- Ensure that all rail spurs currently in use are maintained for a high level of service.
- Seek the development of public and private financial assistance for system improvements.
- Allow high truck weights to major rail siding near the Canadian border and develop intermodal/trans-load facilities.

Public Transit Service

- Increase demand and use through better marketing of the services available in the region.
- Provide additional service from small, rural communities to the region's service centers.
- Seek alternative funding opportunities, such as the New Freedom grant, to provide service to non-traditional users of the system.
- Review schedules from service centers to employment centers, and determine if van pooling/commuter services can be implemented and/or increased.

Air Service

- Maintain convenient and affordable inter- and intra-state passenger air service.
- Improve/Implement marketing of the region's cargo, commercial, and passenger air services.



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- Develop/promote financial incentives for the providers of intra-state air services.



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Implementation Already Occurring

- Municipalities are providing prioritized road and bridge construction projects on a two-year basis to the Regional Council and MaineDOT.
- Scenic byway corridor management plans are being created for the region's byways.
- Local comprehensive plans look at the regional importance of transportation corridors instead of just the local.
- The Aroostook County Transportation Study is underway with projects being constructed.
- Towns and the MaineDOT are prioritizing road corridors as high priority freight routes.
- The MaineDOT is examining the increase of truck weight limits within a certain distance of the Canadian border to access nearby rail infrastructure.
- Meetings are underway to try to improve the MaineCare broker/provider system.
- MaineDOT and NMR continue to improve the rail infrastructure in the region, including tracking age and rail car type/availability.
- NMR continues to improve service and "just in time" delivery to its customers.
- Towns are working on bicycle and pedestrian plans and trail systems.



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Additional Resource Needs

Similar to the needs in Washington County, there are still many unimplemented and partially implemented transportation infrastructure projects that would greatly contribute to workforce development in Aroostook County. The single largest resource need is a funding source, or more likely a combination of traditional and non-traditional funding sources. Significant funds are needed to support up-front investment in major transportation upgrades and targeted new-construction projects.

The policy that increases the weight limit to within a certain distance of the Canadian border to rail infrastructure is also one that has merit, and could create an economic windfall for the region's rail provider. Maine's congressional delegation should advocate for this change.

The GroWashington-Aroostook project synthesis will help to further refine the list of high-priority projects that are most likely to produce long-term, sustainable economic development throughout the region. All that is lacking is the financial wherewithal to realize them.