

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Hancock County Planning Commission (HCPC) and Washington County Council of Governments (WCCOG) solicited public input to formulate regional needs and objectives for the Downeast Coastal corridor, which consists of Routes 1 and 9 as well secondary roads feeding these routes between Bucksport and Calais. This document defines a list of transportation and other strategies that will meet the regional objectives for the corridor. This document is being circulated to solicit final public input.

Recommended Priorities

The plan addresses several key priorities:

1. promoting corridor improvements and preservation measures that assure that the corridor remains viable for the efficient movement of freight and tourist and commuting traffic;
2. developing corridor improvements in conjunction with efforts throughout Hancock and Washington Counties to expand its tourism base in an environmentally sound manner;
3. undertaking measures that address the needs of area businesses both in terms of promoting fast and efficient movement of freight and employee/customer traffic;
4. enhancing connections between modes of travel by planning for improvements that address the movement of vehicles and alternative modes such as bicycles and pedestrians;
5. encouraging future development policies that preserve key natural features and the small town/rural character of most of the corridor while promoting prosperity;
6. promoting measures that remove or minimize major traffic bottlenecks to through traffic in the region's service centers;
7. increasing opportunities for multi-town assessment of transportation impacts of large-scale residential, commercial and other forms of development.

Existing Conditions

The corridor has seen a rapid increase in traffic. Between 1990 and 2000, vehicle miles traveled increased from about 562 million miles in 1990 and 702 million miles in 2000 in Hancock County and 368 million miles to 422 million miles in Washington County. Traffic consists of several types, commuting, freight and tourist. Data from the 2000 census indicate that commuting continues to be dominated by single occupancy vehicles. Alternative modes are far less often used. Buses carry less than 1 percent of commuters. Biking and walking take up

another very small percentage of commuters. It should be noted that these data pre-date the rapid increase in fuel costs in the latter years of the first decade of the 21st century.

Trucking firms responding to a Hancock County survey did not note any major concerns about Route 1 other than problems with congestion, particularly in Ellsworth. In Washington County, communities and shippers report an increase in freight traffic along connector roads since the completion of improvements on Route 9.

Transportation Facilities and Conditions

Road surface conditions vary along the corridor. While State Route 9 has been substantially rebuilt, Route 1 has several sections that are classified as “un-built”, primarily in Washington County. After one passing lane in Hancock on Route 1 there are no passing lanes on the 100-mile segment of Route 1 between Hancock and Calais. This impedes the separation of freight and commuter traffic.

In Hancock County the major intersection and traffic control capacity issues are in Ellsworth and, to a lesser extent, Bucksport. In Washington County the major intersection and traffic control issues are in the center of Machias during commuting hours and in Calais at the international bridge.

Bicycle and pedestrian facilities are primarily concentrated in service center communities. Shoulders are added when sections of state highways are reconstructed. Many new shoulders have been constructed in recent years but there is an interrupted patchwork of shoulders throughout Washington County inhibiting use of roads for bike commuting or touring. The condition of pedestrian facilities varies greatly. Winter-time conditions of sidewalks are often poor. The Downeast Sunrise Trail will be an 85-mile (Ellsworth-Calais) off-road multi-use trail.

Bus service is provided by Downeast Transportation, Inc, West’s Transportation and Washington Hancock Community Agency (WHCA). Downeast Transportation, Inc, provides fixed route service to most towns in Hancock County. Scheduled service along the corridor generally serves towns in Hancock County on different days. This service is supplemented by subscription commuting service to some Washington County towns that serves employers such as Jackson Lab in Bar Harbor.

The state has developed the Federal Marine Terminal in Eastport cargo port. Since 1981 cargo handled at the Eastport facility has steadily grown (from 15,198 tons in 1981 to 363,747 tons in 2004). In 2004, Eastport handled 24% of the cargo tons that passed through Maine’s ports..

Where Transportation Problems Are Occurring

Restricted mobility on Route 1 is most severe in the late summer when tourist traffic and freight movement are both at their highest volumes. Inadequate winter maintenance on the north-south connector roads in the corridor contributes to higher crash volumes. The result is road surfaces that are inadequately plowed during and after major storms. Crash rates are highest in the most

heavily congested areas, particularly High Street in Ellsworth. The severity of accidents is higher where traffic speeds are highest.

Corridor Needs and Issues

This summary identifies both current and future needs. The current needs include:

1. Improving Unbuilt Sections of Route 1. There are segments of Route 1 in Washington County that are not built to modern standards. These sections need to be improved including the addition of guardrails, shoulders and additional passing lanes.
2. Address traffic bottlenecks in Ellsworth and Bucksport. Traffic congestion in two areas significantly slows overall travel speeds in the Hancock County.
3. Improve connector roads between Routes 1 and 9: these roads are important to the promotion of smooth freight and passenger connections between the two key highways (Routes 1 & 9).
4. Address deferred maintenance. Increased road construction and maintenance costs at a time of decreasing gasoline tax revenues mean that maintenance and road improvements are being deferred, increasing long-term costs.
5. Improve multi-modal access to port of Eastport. There is a need to improve rail access to the port.

Future needs include:

1. Creating measures to assure that future road improvements reflect the needs of the major groups of users: truckers, commuters and tourists. The needs of these three groups must be addressed in a manner that preserves and protect the unique character of the corridor.
2. The challenge of promoting effective access management policies and other land management measures given the general resistance to land use controls. The continued spread of commercial and residential development will be difficult to manage without additional land use controls. The creation of access roads parallel to existing highways should be encouraged.
3. Preparing for increased rates of congestion due to more traffic. High housing prices relative to income in coastal communities mean more people are commuting to jobs from places further inland. This, along with the continued popularity of Hancock County as a retirement area, will mean continued increases in vehicular traffic.
4. Adjusting the transportation system to reflect increased fuel costs. Measures will be needed to promote ridesharing (such as vanpools and park and ride lots) and public transportation,
5. Addressing the needs of an aging population. As the population ages, there will be increased demand for services for the elderly including transportation, assisted living and home-based elder care. This will involve demand for specialized transportation services.