

Connection and Controversy: Yarmouth's Opposition to Interstate 295

By Matthew Dressel

Without a doubt, Maine's reigning status as vacationland wouldn't be the same without the Interstate Highway System. Maine's highway system boasts an impressive 367 miles of interstate highway which provides rapid transportation throughout the state. There were quite a few bumps in the road (no pun intended), especially in regards to building Interstate 295 through Yarmouth, Maine. In order to truly understand why things happened the way they did, it is important to know how transportation was done before the Interstate System.

With the invention of the automobile, things would never be the same for planning and linking cities and towns. It is estimated that in 1920, 20% of the American population had an automobile, but by 1929 nearly 60% of the population had an automobile (Cochrane). This explosion of the amount of people with cars meant that roads became of utmost importance. The first road to arise from the growing need for better roads was US Route One in 1926. Route One was crucial for the growth of Maine's tourism industry as it meant that people could travel further, and therefore spend more money. Eventually, there was too much traffic for Route One to handle which led to the creation of the Maine Turnpike.

The first section of the Maine Turnpike from Kittery to Portland was completed in 1947, 9 years before the Interstate Highway Act was created. The Maine Turnpike was the first superhighway in New England and the second modern toll highway in all of the US. This impressive feat of engineering that led the way for many other highway projects after it is something that every Mainer should be proud of. The success of the Maine Turnpike showed how beneficial highways could be and inspired the creation of new ones. In 1955, an extension of the Maine Turnpike was completed from Portland to Augusta. One of the most important

things that separated the Maine Turnpike from the later construction of I-295 was the fact that the Maine Turnpike was completely self-financed. This means that it wasn't financed with state or federal funding, but with \$20 million of bonds that were paid by tolls meaning that taxpayers never paid a cent extra in taxes (Maine Turnpike). The fact that the Maine Turnpike was able to be financed so responsibly led to criticisms about the funding of I-295 later on. The Maine Turnpike was the first superhighway in the world to use asphalt instead of concrete for paving (Maine Turnpike). This was seen as a controversial move at the time, but after the asphalt survived Maine's cold winters, the experiment was a success and asphalt became the main paving material. Interestingly enough, Route One in Yarmouth still continued to use concrete throughout the 1950s, and in a Portland Press Herald article from October 1957, it shows concrete paved Route One being repaired with more concrete (Patching Breaks).

The 1956 National Interstate and Defence Highways Act was the biggest public works project in our nation's history, authorizing \$25 billion to build highways. Signed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the act established 40,000 miles of freeways, intended to improve transportation and commerce (National Interstate). The supposed benefits of the interstate system were: to be safer than traditional roads, quicker transportation of people and commerce, and a standardization across the highways. Since Interstates don't have intersections or other obstructions, it makes them safer than traditional roads. Without obstructions on the interstate, transportation is faster and since every interstate highway has to be designed with the same specifications, it means that no matter where you go, the interstate will always be reliable. Despite the many positives associated with Interstates, there are also some negatives.

The controversies surrounding the Interstate projects are that they are expensive, unnecessary, and that people don't like the use of eminent domain/the fifth amendment. Since

the average household income in 1956 was \$4,800, the \$25 billion dollar price tag would've shocked any who heard it (US Department). The Interstate System doesn't get its money through direct taxes though, but rather indirect taxes like the gas tax which lessen the burden on taxpayers. Eminent domain is a constitutional power in the fifth amendment that allows the government to take private property for public use, but the government must provide just compensation. This aspect made interstates controversial for two reasons. Firstly, because people don't like to have their private property taken, and secondly, it can be very difficult to appraise the property taken which can lead to intense legal battles.

Throughout this essay, I will be referring to the Interstate that goes through Yarmouth as I-295 for the sake of consistency although that wasn't always necessarily the case. Present day I-295 was referred to as both I-95 and I-295. Technically, until 2004, I-295 only went from Portland to the Falmouth Spur and the rest of I-295 was called I-95 despite it being continuous throughout. In 2004, the highways in Maine were renumbered for the sake of clarity, and it was established that I-295 went from Portland to Gardiner (as we know it today).

The first proposition of a plan for I-295 came in the Portland Press Herald on January 24th, 1957. I-295 was to be built in sections, the first section was from Portland to Yarmouth and in subsequent years other sections would be built. The plan shows 4 possible routes from Portland to Yarmouth with prices ranging from \$13,482,400 to \$18,284,000(Engineers). The route that was chosen was option 4: 11.4 miles and \$13,482,400. This price tag must have shocked Cumberland County residents because the 50 mile stretch from Kittery to Portland only cost \$20 million whereas this 11 mile stretch would cost nearly \$13.5 million.

The first piece of criticism came out in an article in the Yarmouth Shopping Notes newspaper less than two months later on March 14th, 1957. The article called the highway

unnecessary and proposed a coordination of opposition between Yarmouth, Falmouth, and Cumberland although nothing much ever came of that. The final line sums up the beliefs of the article pretty well: “we don’t need it, we don’t want it”(The Shopping Notes). Adding fuel to the fire, during a joint meeting between the Yarmouth Chamber of Commerce and the Maine State Highway Department, written about in the Portland Press Herald on April 14, 1957, the Highway Commissioner refused to answer a question about the highway's economic impact on the town. This made the people of Yarmouth mad for two reasons: firstly because the Interstate Highway Act required that the people of a town proposed to be affected by an interstate must be aware of the economic impacts, and secondly because it made the people of Yarmouth feel like they were being ignored and that their voices weren’t being heard. All of this tension culminated in a hearing about the highway on May 7th, 1957. Yarmouth residents tried to invoke a legal argument about a Maine statute and vote on this issue, but the Highway Commission said that any action that the town takes would not be binding (Yarmouth Plans Special). The votes were tallied, and in a Portland Press Herald article on May 10th, it was described that “200 irate citizens of Yarmouth voted [unanimously]” against the highway (Yarmouth Votes Down).

On January 21st, 1958, Yarmouth Chamber of Commerce Secretary Kenneth G. Larrabee contacted Governor Edmund Muskie trying to change the location of the final hearing for I-295 (Yarmouth Group Seeks). Kenneth Larrabee wanted to change the location from Augusta to somewhere closer to Yarmouth because the Interstate would be affecting Yarmouth. This action from the Highway Department was slightly shady, but also demonstrates the need for the project. Since the hearing was located far away (by standards back then) it would effectively silence opposition, but at the same time it would highlight the need for better transportation that the Interstate would bring. Conversely, just three days later, Yarmouth’s First Selectman Richard

Hodsdon said that the project was “about as good as it possibly can be” which shows how the opposition to the Interstate was weakening (Yarmouth Seen Favoring). Mr. Larrabee’s proposition didn’t work and the hearing went on as scheduled. On January 28th, 1958, The Portland Press Herald declared that it was the “quietest and shortest hearing of any phase [of an Interstate]” (Long Battle). There was one letter of opposition sent in and one person in the audience. The furious letter of opposition came from Kenneth Larrabee that called the Interstate “economically unsound, entirely unnecessary, and morally indefensible” and that it would be an “indelible blot upon the good faith of Maine”(Long Battle). The comment from the sole person attending in the audience was a request to create a road that would connect to the Yarmouth Harbor because the original plans didn’t include that. This comment would lead the Highway Department to create plans to secure access to the harbor, which today is the underpass on Route 88. This event, and the different methods that Larrabee and the other person in the audience used, shows how real, lasting change can be made. On January 29th, 1958, the Highway Department announced that it was opening bids for the construction of the Interstate, effectively ending any hope of opposition and moving plans forward (First Highway Bid). Construction of the Interstate bridge over the Royal River started in November 1958 and was estimated to cost \$974,321(Start Interstate).

Despite the fact that the project was moving forward, controversy still surrounded I-295. In an article from the Notes on July 17th, 1958, Governor Muskie was accused of approving of this project only to earn votes without thinking of the maintenance that taxpayers would have to pay for in the future. Edmund Muskie went on to win his next election in the Senate in September 1958 (1958 United States). In February 1960, a lawsuit about differing appraisal values for the unspecified damages caused by the Interstate was featured in the Portland Press

Herald. The appraiser hired by the property owner said there was \$14,000 in damages whereas the appraiser hired by the state said there was only \$3,200 in damages. It is unknown how the lawsuit ended, but it shows how even two years after the project was finalized there was still legal aftermath.

I-295 from Portland to Yarmouth was finally completed in 1961. One of the unknown casualties of the creation of I-295 was a section of Yarmouth called Grantville. Grantville was near present day Route 88 and the Royal River where the highway is today. Grantville was named after the Grant Family who were fishermen and lobstermen. Three Generations of the Grant family lived in the ideal location near the water. In the Portland Press Herald, Harry Morrill, a relative of the Grant family said that “none of us really wanted to move, but if it’s a coming thing, the highway, then we’ll just have to go” (Interstate Road Spells End). Morrill also adds that the Interstate may be “inconvenient for us, but the new road will be convenient for a lot of people for a long time” (Interstate Road Spells End). This altruistic sentiment is nowadays unusual and a powerful message to our town because he sacrificed the way he lived and his memories for the future and betterment of his community. These are the kinds of selfless ideals and decisions that make our communities a better place.

During peak season, I-295 as a whole carries a shocking 80,000 people per day (Interstate 295). Nowadays, most people that take I-295 through Yarmouth take for granted the benefits it provides without knowing the history of how divisive it was and how it came to be. There is no doubt that I-295 has stimulated growth and promoted connectivity in our town, but building it was full of challenges. I-295 truly is an example of a public works project that has benefited our community in the long run.

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