

REMARKS BEFORE BACTS MEETING 3/25/16
STEPHEN BOST, BREWER CITY MANAGER

THE I-395 CONNECTOR PROJECT: A \$61 MILLION DOLLAR CONUNDRUM

Members of the BACTS committee, I'm Steve Bost, City Manager of Brewer. I appreciate this opportunity to share my perspective on the I-395 connector in it's posture before you today. The City of Brewer has been consistent in its opposition to the project's current route, with the City Council twice voting unanimously in opposition, and finally out of frustration supporting the "no build" option. I have followed this project since its inception 16 years ago. Despite not being convinced of its need or functionality, local citizens, in good faith, took part in the lengthy and often complex PAC process, examining in detail all of the prospective routes to determine the best one based upon a variety of criteria. That preferred route finally emerged by consensus, 9 years after the PAC's first meeting on January 11, 2000. It was then rejected by MDOT. The project then seemed to disappear, and it was presumed dead. It then reappeared without warning, with a rejected route now the MDOT favored route. Meetings were held, op-eds written, Councils and Select Boards voiced their concerns, a bill was introduced in the Legislature by Transportation Committee member and Brewer lawmaker Archie Verow to kill the project all together and yet it moved forward as if in it's own orbit. As you know, the only reason we are discussing this today, mid-March 2016, is that someone at MDOT erred and forgot to attach a fiscal note. So here it is, awkwardly wrapped in a package of important regional transportation projects unanimously agreed to by BACTS members, with a backdrop threat that if it is not supported by BACTS, all other unrelated projects will be jeopardized. The BACTS framework and decision-making process is by design non-political. It looks at the region's

infrastructure needs through the prism of partnership and trust – which is why this injection of politics by MDOT is so distasteful. Brewer’s partners in BACTS should not be held hostage or intimidated to support funding a project that is strongly opposed by the municipal member most impacted. Today it’s a project that runs through Brewer; tomorrow it could be one going through Bangor or Orono. The ultimatums from MDOT represent a dangerous precedent. My concern is not limited to “process” issues, but extends to the need and viability of the I-395 connector itself. This project has been on the table for over 16 years. Things change in 16 years. One of the original goals of this project was to alleviate and/or divert heavy truck traffic. But look at what has happened on the way to 2016 – Millinocket mill has closed, East Millinocket has closed, Lincoln has closed, Old Town has closed, Brewer has closed, and now the Bucksport mill has closed. The logical after-effects of all of this is a decline in truck activity. Another change in the last 5 years has been the weight adjustment for trucks on the interstate. Senator Collins championed breakthrough legislation allowing the heaviest trucks on Federal highways, specifically I-95, in November 2011. Interestingly, Federal Highway Administration engineers noted that “The collection of empirical data to measure and quantify pilot program impacts (such as the Collins law) would take 10 to 15 years.” The impact of the mill closures on the need for the I-395 project, therefore, will take time. I believe there is an absolute need to refresh the data to reflect these changes, as no like industries are projected to take the place of the mills. This logically impacts the accuracy of current 2035 projections. It would appear that much of the project is based upon 1998 and 2006 modeling and 2010 appears to be an estimate. That is six years ago at best. 10 years ago at worst.

Let me suggest analogy to illustrate my point. Imagine that 16 years ago MDOT and Millinocket officials determined that the corridor from I-95 to East Millinocket and Millinocket needed to be widened to 4 lanes to accommodate increased truck traffic as well as seasonal tourism activity. Discussions were held, plans and designs submitted, funding allocated, all systems go. Then before groundbreaking occurred, both mills were permanently shuttered. Does the widening project then go forward? Will it be intertwined with other unrelated development projects in that region which will die if the I-95 – Millinocket widening project is not built? Will it go forward because of some financial penalty that will be owed to the Feds if the project is mothballed? Sounds an awful lot like a bridge to nowhere. So, rather than leave BACTS today with simply a list of complaints, I want to suggest a path forward. MDOT and the City of Brewer are not adversaries, they have a long-standing history of partnership. I ask that the MDOT agree to separate this project from the BACTS project package, and let the other initiatives so important to our region go forward. I request that MDOT thoroughly refresh their data on the I-395 connector to determine if the need is still there. Then, I request that MDOT re-engage the stakeholders and determine a course of action. This is 61 million dollars of taxpayer dollars at play. The need for this connector should be demonstrated with confidence by MDOT. Maine's roads and bridges are in dire need of repair. If this 61 million could be better spent elsewhere, we have a duty to explore that.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Stephen Bost