

[Debate rages on](#) as state readies to break ground on I-395 connector

By [Eesha Pendharkar](#), BDN Staff • February 25, 2019
(Excerpt from original article)

Longtime Holden residents Stephan and Victoria Lee own more than 70 mostly wooded acres behind their scrap metal business, Lakeman and Sons, on Levenseller Road. They have a cabin they use during the warmer months and snowmobile paths carved out among the trees.

On a chilly afternoon last week, one of the Lees' employees zipped through the trees with his son on the back of his snowmobile. Stephan Lee trailed behind in his red truck along a snowy path he had cleared that morning.

He pulled up next to a bright pink and blue ribbon on a wooden stake in his property, which the Maine Department of Transportation put there in the past year.

"We won't be able to access any of this anymore," Lee said. "The sentimental value of this land is priceless to me and my wife."

For the past year, Lee has been living in fear that the state will soon claim his land for a controversial, \$80 million infrastructure project that would extend I-395 from its current end near the Brewer-Holden town line about 6 miles northeast to connect it with Route 9.

The state has been working on the project for nearly two decades. With **construction slated to start in two or three years**, it has acquired four properties in recent months to make way for the new road that would cut through portions of Brewer, Holden and Eddington and affect dozens property owners with land on or near the proposed route. Even though some have resigned themselves to the prospect of a new interstate highway cutting through or near their properties, resistance to the new road is alive and well — and a new legislative effort aims to pause the project.

A bill sponsored by state Sen. Kimberley Rosen, who represents the affected towns, would suspend the project and have the state hire an outside firm to analyze its costs and benefits and recommend whether the state continue pursuing it.

"I'm not trying to end the project," Rosen, R-Bucksport, said. "I'd like to have a transparent, independent study to answer the questions of my constituents."

Lee said he's hoping Rosen's legislation, [LD 783](#), will succeed and, ultimately, put an end to the project.

"For me, this road is a big waste of money," he said.

Rosen, who's serving her third term in the Senate, said she supported the I-395 connector in the past as a member of the Legislature's transportation committee. But when she was campaigning for re-election last year, she heard from a constituent with concerns about the project. That's when she decided to seek other opinions and talk to municipal officials in her district, including Brewer City Manager Stephen Bost.

After hearing many say the project felt unnecessary, Rosen said she thought a fresh look by an outside entity made the most sense.

Lisa Sturgeon had reached out to Rosen because she was concerned the connector could hurt her property value, as well as the overall look and feel of her Brewer neighborhood.

"I don't lose my house [to the new highway], and I still don't want it," she said. "There's so many questions with so few answers."

Sturgeon and her husband decided to move to their Night Road residence in Brewer for the peace and quiet, and she's not happy that the proposed route for the connector — a route the Department of Transportation calls 2B2 — would cut through some of her neighbors' properties.

Rosen's legislation "is her attempt to get an answer to some of the ongoing questions we have," Bost said. "The biggest question continues to be the need for the project."

Russell Smith, Eddington's town manager, said residents' complaints about the project are justified.

"I do know a lot of residents being affected by the project are not very happy," he said.

In Holden, which would have the smallest stretch of the new road, Town Manager Benjamin Breadmore said many have "just kind of resigned ourselves to the fact that this is going to happen."

Despite the objections, the Mills administration supports the connector project as previous administrations have and will likely oppose Rosen's bill, said Deputy Commissioner Nina Fisher of the Maine Department of Transportation.

One reason, Fisher said, is that the bill could risk a **\$25 million federal grant** the state received for the project last year. The funds, from the Federal Infrastructure for Rebuilding America grant, **have to be designated by September 2021**, Fisher said.

"We are currently on schedule to meet that timeframe, however, **any suspension of the project, as specified by this proposal, would jeopardize that schedule and the \$25 million**," she said.

Fisher said the department also continues to see a need for the project.

"The greater Bangor/Brewer area is the economic and employment center for the north-central Maine region and a center for goods movement because of its proximity to the

interstate system and Canadian markets,” Fisher said. The connector “provides a more direct, safer route.”

There’s been much vocal opposition from Eddington, but some of the town’s residents agree with Fisher, particularly those who live along the current route trucks use to connect from I-395 to Route 9, also known as the Airline.

Traffic from I-395 currently exits onto Route 1A near the Brewer-Holden line, then uses Route 46 — which passes through Holden and Eddington — to join Route 9.

David Peppard, who lives on Route 46 in Eddington, favors the proposed connector because it would remove truck traffic from the narrow, two-lane road with no shoulder.

“That road was not built to handle trailer trucks. It’s a safety concern,” he said. “You can’t walk or bike along the road because of them.”

On Wednesday afternoon last week, a steady stream of tractor-trailer trucks passed by Peppard’s house on Route 46, barely fitting into their lane widthwise.

Opinions are different a few miles away along the proposed route.

The Department of Transportation has started putting markers on properties there. The markers could denote the centerline of the proposed new highway, property lines, boring locations where contractors may drill into the ground, or wetlands, said Fisher, the deputy transportation commissioner.

For now, Lee and his neighbors are left to wonder whether those markers delineate property the state might take over to make way for the road — and how much the state might pay for property it takes over through eminent domain.

It may be two years before Lee receives direct communication from the department about its plans for his and his wife’s property. **Appraisals for affected properties are scheduled to be completed by 2021, and offers to landowners may come that fall,** according to Fisher.

Lee, however, is hoping it doesn’t get to that point.

“To them it’s nothing but to us it’s everything,” Lee said. “I hope it never goes through.”