

# Portland Press Herald

## Maine Turnpike anticipates many more people on the road by summer

After seeing half its traffic volume vanish since mid-March, highway officials anticipate they'll be down 10% per month from July through December.

By [Steve Collins](#) | Sun Journal | April 23, 2020 | [Click here to view online.](#)



The toll plaza on the Maine Turnpike in West Gardiner.  
*Joe Phelan/Kennebec Journal*

Highway traffic projections aren't typically the type of data that anyone beyond the confines of the Maine Turnpike Authority would care much about.

But this year, they may tell us something about what to expect from the economy in the coming months.

The turnpike's best guess, after consulting a range of experts, is that by July, things may appear considerably better.

Because of the shutdowns related to the coronavirus pandemic, **the turnpike expects to see its normal April revenue cut in half. In May, it is eyeing a 30% decrease. In June, it anticipates a 25% reduction.**

**From July through the end of the year, it anticipates highway use to be down about 10% monthly, with perhaps a bit worse showing as the holidays approach.**

The authority's treasurer, Doug Davidson, said Thursday that he came up with the estimates after canvassing the views of eight banks, bond underwriters and others about what to plan for. He said he took a more conservative approach than most of those providing advice.

The number of vehicles going up and down the highway is one indicator of economic activity. The more trucks and cars are on the road, the more things are hopping. Fewer of them, of course, means business is slower.

**The turnpike anticipates that less traffic and higher costs will sock its bottom line for the year by as much as \$20 million.**

Despite the expected loss, though, the authority is not worried about its finances. It has \$132 million in cash to help it ride out any turmoil.

In his report to the authority's board, Davidson said the highway was cruising along normally until March 16 when ["it kind of went off a cliff."](#)

Since then, he said, **traffic has been off an average of about 56% daily.**

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Revenues haven't taken quite as big a hit, however, because there has been "a surge in trucks" using the road, Davidson said.

"Heavy trucks have been amazing," he said, with their volume actually up as much as 8% as companies struggle to fill shelves at Walmart and the Amazon warehouse in Lewiston. Poland Spring Water Co. also has a lot of trucks on the road, he said.

What's missing from the highway is mostly commuters.

The average toll paid on the turnpike has risen by a third since mid-March to about \$2.10, Davidson said.

There is some indication that a turnaround is already underway since the worst moments of the pandemic shutdown.

“We’re starting to see passenger cars coming back,” Davidson said.

Davidson said the experts he consulted in preparing his projections, which are part of a 30-year plan, told him that businesses are going to have to start opening one way or another to supply the food and necessities people need.

By May, many more big plants will have to open, he was told.

Davidson said the experts also told him they anticipate that by June there will be many more passenger cars on the road as people head away from large cities for traditional summer getaways in places such as Maine.

Peter Mills, the turnpike's executive director, said he's glad to work for “one of the few organizations in the free world that still has a 30-year plan in place” that hasn't been thrown into turmoil by the spread of COVID-19.

It appears the impact of the revenue losses are likely to mean nothing worse than pushing back a few nonessential construction projects by six months or a year. The 18 contracts underway, Mills said, are already funded so they will continue.

One headache for turnpike officials is prodding a concession operator to make sure that rest stops remain functional, with bathrooms cleaned and at least one food provider open, something Mills said truckers are especially concerned about.