

A tale of two bypasses

North-South Highway advocates score a victory with the governor's endorsement of a plan that separates the Caribou Connector and Presque Isle bypass – and allows both projects to proceed at their own pace **BY KATHRYN BUXTON**

AFTER WAITING 30 YEARS, a year can go by quickly.

That promises to be the case for the city of Caribou as it prepares to break ground on the Caribou Connector bypass. The city began planning for a bypass at least three decades ago. Now, thanks to a round of accelerated negotiations between MaineDOT, Governor Baldacci, Leaders Encouraging Aroostook Development (LEAD) and the cities of Presque Isle and Caribou, the Caribou Connector is expected to begin construction in 2010.

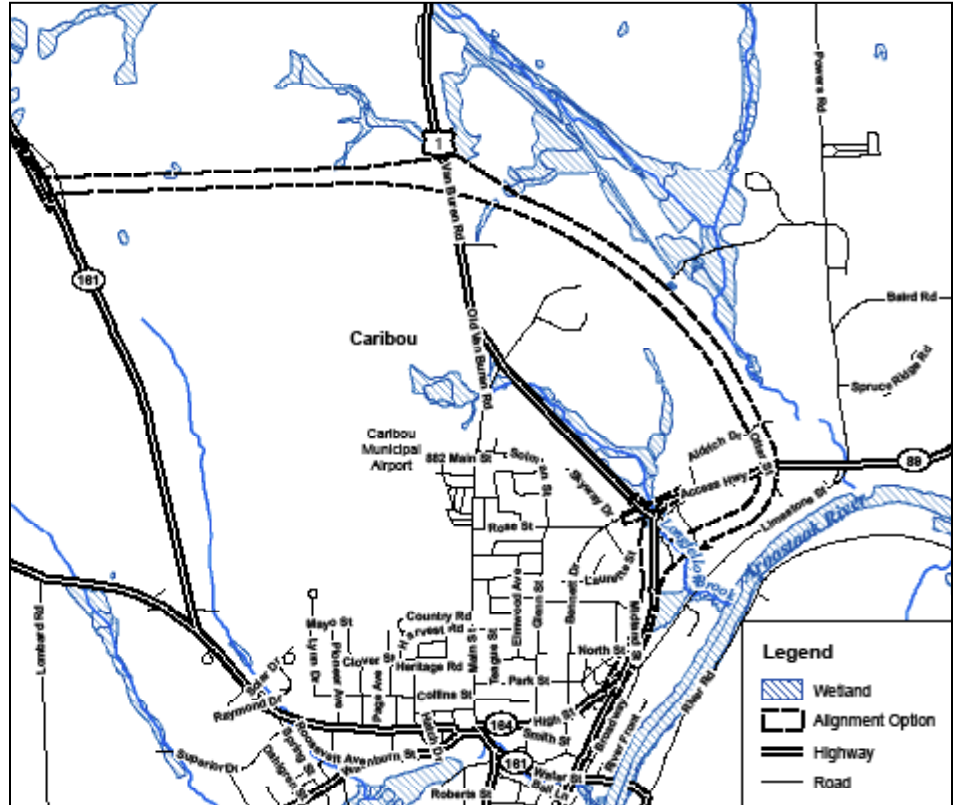
Governor Baldacci announced the decision to separate the projects in March, inking his signature to a memorandum of agreement with MaineDOT and the cities of Caribou and Presque Isle. The two bypasses were originally part of a single 2006 MaineDOT draft environmental impact study that identified several routes for both bypasses. The agreement means that Caribou can move forward on its bypass, and Presque Isle will continue its efforts to select a route.

"I think the governor recognized that the money sitting 'in the bank' could be used as an economic stimulus for Aroostook County," said Nate Berry, president of LEAD.

The Caribou Connector is part of a much larger vision for a North-South Highway the MBTA has long supported. It is central to a proposed 110-mile extension of the interstate that eventually will form a modern transportation corridor connecting Aroostook County's largest population centers with Canada and regions to the south. The objective is to help spur economic development in the region.

The success of both bypass projects is seen as so vital to the region, Representative John Martin (D-Aroostook) called for a round of meetings early this year between the two cities, MaineDOT and the Aroostook County legislative delegation. The decision to seek approvals to separate the two projects came out of those meetings.

"This is good news. It's important – not



The Caribou Connector will require 3.7 miles of new alignment and .5 miles of reconstruction of existing highway. There will be one major bridge constructed as part of the project.

only to the region – but to the whole state. It means jobs at a time when Maine really needs the jobs," said Maria Fuentes, executive director of the MBTA who had praise for the efforts to expedite the project. She said that by making traffic and freight movement through the region efficient, "Maine will see benefits from this project for years to come."

Separate ways

The agreement marked a departure from the project as it was originally envisioned. The Caribou Connector had been linked with planning and construction of a second bypass around the city of Presque Isle in the Aroostook Transportation Study that was completed in 2006 by Vanasse Hangen Brustlin,

Inc. The Presque Isle portion of the project, identified as Segment 7 in the draft environmental impact and planning studies, is still under discussion by residents of Presque Isle and MaineDOT. The Army Corps of Engineers has not yet endorsed any of the routes proposed in that study.

A major impetus for separating the two projects was the independent utility of each project and the idea that expediting one of the projects now would bring much needed jobs to the region. The cost for completion of the Caribou segment is estimated at \$20 million. It will be funded from a federal pot of \$40 million secured by Senator Susan Collins, with support from Maine's congressional delegation, for the North-South Highway

MAINE DOT

project in the 1998 and 2005 federal transportation authorizations.

Removing the trucks

Based on the draft environmental impact analysis, the Army Corps of Engineers recommended locating the new Caribou highway along a route similar to a route identified in an old comprehensive plan for the city. Caribou City Manager Steven Buck said the route also supports findings from a 2004 traffic study completed for the city by the engineering firm Erdman, Anthony and Associates, Inc. That study called for removing non-destination traffic, including heavy trucks, to help revitalize the city, increase pedestrian safety and provide greater opportunity for downtown redevelopment.

Economic development is a central theme to the entire region's support of the Caribou and Presque Isle bypasses and a north-south highway. The 2006 VHB study, in fact, identifies the primary objective as identifying "transportation improvements that would help stem the economic downturn that has occurred over the past several decades and spur future economic growth within the study area."

That is why, Berry said, LEAD and the Aroostook County delegation will continue to advocate for final approval and construction of the Presque Isle bypass. He said the draft environment impact study and public process for that bypass has taken more time, as the city weighs the merits of numerous alignment alternatives. "In Presque Isle, there has been more concern about the project," said Berry. "The feeling was that if the Caribou piece could be permitted, we could move forward



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separately on the rest of the project."

Shovel in the ground

The efforts in Caribou have followed a more expedited path. By early this year, Caribou City Manager Steven Buck said, there was a feeling among all parties involved that "it was time to get a shovel in the ground." He said the series of meetings requested by Representative Martin was instrumental in expediting the process. At one of those meetings, the idea of separating the two projects was introduced.

From the moment of the governor's announcement, the pace has quickened. In early April, the Federal Highway Administration lent its seal of approval for separating the two projects in a letter to Commissioner Cole.

Buck said the announcement that construction will begin soon has "energized the community."

"The telephone conference with the governor was over at 4 p.m., it was on the local TV news at 6 p.m. and the agreement was

printed in the newspaper the next morning," said Buck.

During the weeks since, Buck's office has been a popular stop for residents as they come to review the 3' x 4' wall map hanging there, showing the bypass route. He said there have been a number of questions about the interim steps leading up to the groundbreaking - particularly about the survey and assessments MaineDOT will need to complete before acquiring the land for the bypass. He said the city has asked MaineDOT, once it has finalized the environmental impact statement, to put together a project timeline and an outline of the process to answer the public's questions and concerns about the route. Communication, he said, will be key as the project moves forward.

"I believe that Caribou is where it is in supporting this project, especially among impacted property owners, because of the strong communication we have had," said Buck. ■

MEMORANDUM OF AGREEMENT

Between the State of Maine Department of Transportation, City of Caribou and the City of Presque Isle regarding the Aroostook County Transportation Study proposed Caribou Connector project

Whereas, Governor John E. Baldacci has directed the MaineDOT to advance an Aroostook County transportation project so that construction on the proposed Caribou Connector project can begin in 2010; and

Whereas, on September 18, 2008, MaineDOT and the Federal Highway Administration received an alignment approval from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers regarding the Caribou Connector;

Now therefore, Governor John E. Baldacci, MaineDOT, the City of Caribou and the City of Presque Isle, agree to the following:

- All parties will support a Reevaluation Document to be submitted to the Federal Highway Administration that requests the separation of the Caribou and Presque Isle segment of the North-South Highway Study; and
- MaineDOT will expedite construction of the Caribou Connector in the 2010 construction season utilizing existing resources obtained by the State's Congressional Delegation; and
- Work on the Presque Isle Segment will continue unabated, with the planning work expected to be complete by the 2011 construction season.

John E. Baldacci, Governor

David Cole, Commissioner State of Maine
Maine Department of Transportation

Steven Buck, City Manager City of Caribou

Thomas Stevens, City of Presque Isle

Signed March 6, 2009