

Portland Press Herald - Editorial - Toll plaza report offers more fuel for debate
<http://pressherald.maintoday.com/story.php?id=262735&ac=PHedi>

It doesn't answer all the critics' questions, but it does keep the current location in play.

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The new report on the Maine Turnpike Authority's proposed toll plaza in York does not settle any arguments, but at least it gets the process moving in the right direction.

Regardless of the final decision of the MTA, the report's finding that the array of options should include a way to keep the toll plaza in its present location ensures that the objections from the highway's neighbors will be heard.

Last year, MTA officials said they had to replace the current plaza with a larger, more modern one that would move traffic more smoothly and reduce accidents. They said the current location would not work for environmental and safety reasons and proposed several other sites, which all involved taking and demolishing houses to accommodate the larger plaza.

This drew organized protest from people in York, particularly among those whose property would have been affected. They did some solid research and raised valid questions about turnpike usage and trends in toll collection technology, and they challenged MTA officials' assertions about the unsuitability of the current site.

In response, MTA commissioned the current study, which finds three presentable options using the current plaza and recommends looking at the other sites using the same scaled-back plaza, which requires less room and would not have to take houses.

At first glance, it would appear that the York neighbors' concerns have been vindicated.

But turnpike officials still sound extremely skeptical about the suitability of the current site, and the three options include a do-nothing option that is required by law to be considered. The other two have safety and environmental concerns, according to a description of the report circulated by the MTA.

The Maine Turnpike is a vital economic link for the state, and the York toll plaza is where it collects a great deal of its revenue.

It is used by millions of drivers, who are all entitled to a safe and well-designed roadway. But if that can be accomplished for less money without disrupting a community, it should be done. York residents should not have veto power over any toll plaza improvements, but they raise good questions about the necessity of this project and deserve answers.

Going forward, the MTA will have to continue to take the critics seriously, as they have with this report, and address their concerns.

It will also have to explain – and probably explain again – why such an expensive project, during a period of decreasing traffic volumes, is really the best choice for Maine travelers and their visitors from away.