Road to Nowhere: A Complete History of Maine’s East-West Highway Conflict

Walter Wuthmann, 2014

In the spring of 2012, the Maine State Legislature allocated $300,000 to the Cianbro Corp. construction company to conduct a feasibility study for building a highway across the state from East to West. This proposal by Cianbro (pronounced “chin-bro”) to build a 220-mile, four-lane, limited access toll road across Maine is just the most recent incarnation of an idea that has been kicking around the legislature for eighty years. As Cianbro CEO and President Peter Vigue points out in his presentations to the public, Maine is the only state in the New England/Canadian Maritime region without a major East-West thoroughfare. The funding for the study, however, was withdrawn in August after vocal opposition from constituents pressured legislators to withdraw public funding for the private project. Nevertheless, Peter Vigue continues to assert that this highway will be constructed, even without the aid from the state.

The goal of my summer research was to lay a solid foundation for writing a literary nonfiction piece about this conflict for my Honors Project. As Professor Walton says, this summer was all about getting “context.” I began the summer by reading The Power Broker by Robert Caro, a massive tome examining the life of Robert Moses, the most prolific builder in New York City’s history. Professor Walton continued to recommend more “literary” books to complement my research, starting with The Lobster Coast by Colin Woodard Maine: A Bicentennial History by Charles Cark. These books added historical context to the articles I was reading, helping to explain why this highway is creating such a big fuss for a traditionally resource-rich, industry-poor state. My next chunk of reading explored the relationship between industry and policy, with the books The King of California: J.G. Boswell and the Making of a Secret American Empire by Mark Arax and Rick Wartzman, The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America by John Micklethwait and Adrian Woolridge, and Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life by Tom Lewis. I wrote essays on each book I read, averaging between eight and ten pages, analyzing how different authors structure their information to bring nonfiction stories to life, and how different themes brought up in these books related to issues that were coming up in my own research.

My days consisted of reading feasibility studies, bills related to this project, public testimonies, journal articles on national trends in public infrastructure construction laws, and the stories of the people who both support and oppose this project from the pages of the Bangor Daily News to online snowmobile forums. Professor Walton really pushed me to deeply understand the stakes in both sides of the argument. Why would someone in Washington County want this road, for example? How would it increase their mobility in a state where most of the infrastructure is concentrated in its southern portion? Or how would a hunting guide be affected by a 2,000-foot wide highway corridor cutting through the lands he takes his clients to find black bear? What about farmers? Or how about the governor of a state that had the lowest rate of income growth in the country when he came into office?

I ended this summer with a field trip. I took a car from the Bowdoin fleet and drove it along a 65-mile stretch of dirt road that would be used as a right-of-way for the East-West Highway if the project goes through. As I avoided the logging trucks that barreled by, I was able to stop and take in the numerous creeks, wetlands, and lakes this highway would cross. I stopped and talked to a camp owner who didn’t know whether to be hopeful or fearful of the road’s impact. Seeing the dirt road through the woods and imagining it as a highway made this issue I’ve been reading so much about more tangible to me, and got me excited to begin interviewing people this fall. The groundwork I did this summer will help me ask more pointed, challenging questions in order to unearth the story that lies beneath the chorus of dissenting voices.

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