

Why I remain irritated at the Sierra Club

Submitted by lambert on Sat, 09/22/2012 - 1:03pm

Departments:

[Department of All The Damn Gall](#) [1]

So here's the deal, and linky goodness will be lacking today (and a lot of this is what we've put together in discussion, so links are lacking anyhow. And as the great Peggy Noonan once said: "It would be irresponsible not to speculate!")

One of Maine's issues as a state is that we have an extractive economy without a lot to extract any more, now that pulp and paper production has moved closer to the equator, where trees grow faster and bigger. We continue to extract from fisheries and tourists, of course, but those resources, although renewable with careful management, are seasonal and only support the coast. And Nestle extracts our water at Poland Springs. But the sort of people who play golf together and fly over the state in executive jets seem to see two main "opportunities": One is our oodles of empty space,* hence landfills and importing of out-of-state trash.** The other is our geographical position between Quebec and New Brunswick. Location, location, location! Hence the "East-West Corridor" Here's a map. The blue strip shows the Corridor's route, kinda sorta. (The local oligarch shilling the plan, Cianbro construction czar Peter Vigue, has the *real* map, but he keeps it locked up in his office.)



Now, a word about the business model behind the Corridor. The Corridor is essentially a land deal. Key point: *The Corridor would be privately owned.* That means that the (unnamed, unknown) owners of the highway would be able to run whatever they want along the strip:***

Could be a highway, could be power lines, could be pipelines for tar sands.**** The ethos is that the Corridor would enable Maine to "compete in the global" economy, which is exactly what a lot of Mainers -- and especially the Mainers who moved North into all that empty space and bought farms that have turned out to be right in the Corridor's footprint -- do *not* want to do. (And why should we? [2]) Note that the right of way discussed is considerably wider than Route 95's (which runs North-South) so one can only wonder why that is, and what they would do with the extra space.

Now, Vigue et al. are *marketing* the Corridor as a "highway," and that's clever, because people think, just as I thought, "Super! We can drive to Montreal!" So let's consider the Corridor under that aspect for one moment, assuming that the descriptions used by proponents are not deceptive.

First, the Corridor, being private land, would be fenced along its entire length. If families or friends on either side want to cross going North-South, they'll have to drive or hike miles out of their way to a crossing. If animals want to cross the Corridor, they'll have to use wildlife crossings (which is so ridiculous. I can just imagine a bear at one end and a moose at the other. How does that work, exactly?) That means that the Corridor is, in essence, splitting the state into two, like the Berlin Wall, or the demilitarized zones of North and South Korea, or any fence around a sacrifice zone.

Second, the only *permanent* jobs the Corridor would bring Mainers would be those servicing truck and truckers at those very few exits: 7/11 cashiers, hotel attendants, dealers, and hookers. Not that there's anything wrong with any of that, but Vigue keeps claiming the Corridor would let "our children" stay in Maine, and it's just not so.

Third, there seems to be no business rationale for a highway that benefits *Mainers*. It's easy to see how Canadian truckers save time and money with a shorter route across Maine instead of around it, but not so easy to see how that helps Maine, or helps "our children" stay in Maine.

Fourth, it's also not easy to see which Maine businesses are going to ship their goods *out* to market using the Corridor. Which businesses and what goods? The pulp and paper industry is down for the count. Water? Do we *really* want to send our water out of state? Mineral mines?***** And from *Eastport*? Eastport can't compete with New York, Newark, Baltimore, or Charleston, all of whom have spent billions upgrading their facilities and are wired directly into massive intermodal transport networks, none of which are available at Eastport or ever would be.

Finally, it is easy to see that some goods can shipped *in* to Maine from away. One obvious candidate is Canadian and European trash: The state-owned landfill is right on the route, and is already permitted for international medical waste.

In summary: We've got a situation where the best case scenario is a boondoggle that benefits Cianbro and the usual slithering eel bucket of lawyers, legislators, consultants, and fixers (sorry for the redundancy) down in Augusta. The proponents don't make a clear business case for the *Highway*, and can't show it nets out positive for Mainers. And opponents can develop business cases for the *Corridor*, but if the proponents have those cases in mind, they're not saying, and it's not clear that tar sands pipelines, water export, mineral export, or trash import would benefit anybody but a few "global" corporations, and all of them put our land and water at risk (which "the

children" would then pay to clean up). And these objections scratch the surface; here's more. [3]

So the state of play right now is that local activists have made the case against the Corridor very powerfully and effectively on the ground.***** On the critical path is a so-called feasibility study (which studies the financial aspects of the highway *only*; see under "private equity," perhaps. The study, since it is funded by the state, might possibly be used to show public benefit, and hence be used by the private owners of the Corridor to justify the use of eminent domain). Well, the Corridor's legislative sponsor (Doug Thomas) got an earful from constituents [4] and asked the Governor to put the feasibility study on hold. This is a good thing!

* * *

So, into this context steps the regional Sierra Club office, who sponsored a public informational meeting at a rather expensive venue without managing to contact the local activists for their mailing lists, so most of us came through word of mouth. And the regional honcho was gracious enough to ask us for our feedback on the PowerPoint presentation they intend to show throughout the state.

And things went wrong from Slide One (though we were courteous enough to wait until Slide Two to point this out). In short form: The Sierra Club parachutes in and frames the issue as "The East-West Highway" *not* "The East-West Corridor," thereby undoing all the careful framing that the actual, local activists had used to beat up on Doug Thomas and bring the thing to a halt. Worse, this weekend is The Common Ground Fair [5], a deeply Maine event way up at the tippie-top of the hippie gradient in Unity, and I picture the activists having a table with some flyers saying "Corridor" and the Sierra Club having a booth with printed brochures saying "Highway," stomping all over the local message. Way to go. So I'll be interested to see whether the Sierra Club is able to display adaptability or not.

Even worse, having framed the issue as "Highway" the Sierra Club has an answer: Rail. And as it turns out, there is trackage more or less along the kinda sorta known route of the Corridor, making the business case for the Corridor even more iffy (unless it's not really a highway at all, of course, but a real estate deal just waiting for pipelines, power lines, giant conveyor belts, catapults, or whatever).

Clue stick, Sierra Club: I don't give two shits about whether medical waste from Canada or Europe comes into the state by rail or by highway. I don't give two shits whether the slurry from mountaintop removal for minerals goes in a ten-wheeler or a hopper. And I don't give two shits whether oil spills into the alder swamps and the Penobscot because a pipeline broke or because a tank car overturned or a whole train went off the rails. In fact, I don't even buy the premise that Maine, and especially northern Maine, should "compete in the global economy" at all, a premise both Vigue and the Sierra Club share. The whole neo-liberal paradigm is doubling down on #FAIL, and I don't see any reason why Maine ("Dirigo") shouldn't say "This stops here." The Sierra Club thinks or at least says that "We're on the same side." Well, if we're on the same side, then don't stomp on our framing and enable the more efficient extraction of resources from our state!

In fairness, the regional Sierra Club employees were *quite* happy to have their highly educated and mostly under- or disemployed audience correct their PowerPoint for errors in spelling,

grammar, and consistency, which were quite numerous and unbecoming in a professional presentation. In fact, it was clear that they weren't empowered to do anything else.

* * *

If I had to guess why the Sierra Club did what it did, it would go something like this: The Sierra Club was driven by its own institutional imperatives rather than the need for Mainers to retain public goods like clean water and a state without a giant corridor-ectomy scar stitched across its middle. The Sierra Club is in the business of running -- and seeking funding for -- "campaigns" against highways and for rail. So they pulled a few old slides off the shelf from a previous campaign, gussied it up with some new graphics and bullet points, and parachuted into the local activist community with it, hoping to get some free copy editing and, oh, buy in. Didn't happen. I'm crying.

Oh, and the best part? One Sierra Club representative or hanger-on mentioned, late in the meeting, that one reason they favored rail was that they (the Sierra Club) didn't want to be seen as *nay-sayers*, heaven forbid. Well, pushing an outcome where international medical waste could end up being dumped in Maine's landfills *so the Sierra Club can burnish its cred in Washington DC...* Well, it just makes me feel *warm* inside, ya know?

* * *

In closing, all anti-extractive/pro-sustainability activists are really fighting the same fight: Fracking, landfills, mountaintop removal, pipelines, water, etc. The resource may vary, but the playbook and the stakes remain the same. We need to share experience, strength, and hope, and this post is an effort to do that.

NOTE * Empty except for the people who live there. Most people think of all New England states as small, but Maine is big and has a big sky. Up in the "unorganized territories" there are hundreds of square miles without any public roads or facilities of any kind. Off-the-gridders like this.

NOTE ** Interestingly, David Foster Wallace seems to have anticipated the views of our elites in *Infinite Jest*, with his vision of a New England walled off from the rest of the continent with plexiglass, IIRC, and toxic waste fired over the wall from points south with giant catapults (from the [Infinite Jest Live Blog](#) ^[6]). Technology:



Oh, and we ceded "the concavity" to Canada (to them "the convexity"). Here's an extract from Wallace's "fly on the map" transcript of the key decision makers cutting the deal:

TINE places two large maps (also courtesy of Ms. Heath's crafts class) on Govt.-issue easels. They both look to be of the good old U.S.A.. The first map is your more or less traditional standard issue, with the U.S. looking really big in white and Mexico's northern fringes a tasteful ladies'-room pink and Canada's brooding bottom hem a garish, almost menacing red. The second North American map looks

neither old nor all that good, traditionally speaking. It has a concavity. It looks sort of like some person or persons have taken a deep wicked canine-intensive bite out of its upper right bit, in which an ascending and then descending line has its near-right-angle at what looks to be the historic and now hideously befouled Ticonderoga NY; and the areas north of that jagged line look to be that pushy shade of Canadian red, now. Some little rubber practical-joke-type flies, the blue-bellied kind that live on filth, are stapled in a raisinesque dispersal over the red Concavity. TINE has a trademark telescoping weatherman's pointer that he plays with instead of using it to point at much of anything.

SEC. STATE: A kind of ecological gerrymandering?

TINE: The president invites you gentlemen to conceive these two visuals as a sort of before-and-after representation of "projected-intra-O.N.A.N. territorial re-allocations," or some public term like that. *Redemisement*'s probably too technical.

SEC. STATE: Still respectfully not quite sure we at State see how inhabited territories can be sold to the public as quote expendable when a decent slice of that public by all reports inhabits that territory, Rod.

GENTLE: Hhhaaahh.

TINE: The president's pro-actively chosen not to hedge that high-cost tough-choice possibly unpopular lonely-at-the-top fact one bit, guys. We've been moving forward full-bore on anticipating various highly involved relocation scenarios. Scenaria? Is it scenarios or scenaria? Marty's on-task on the scenario front. Care to bring us to speed, Marty?

SEC. TRANSP.: We foresee a whole lot of people moving south really really fast. We foresee cars, light trucks, heavier trucks, buses, Winnebagos ? Winnebaga? ? commandeered vans and buses, and possibly commandeered Winnebagos or Winnebaga. We foresee 4-wheel-drive vehicles, motorcycles, Jeeps, boats, mopeds, bicycles, canoes and the odd makeshift raft. Snowmobiles and cross-country skiers and roller-skaters on those strange-looking roller-skates with only one line of wheels down each skate. We foresee backpack-type folks speed-walking in walking-shorts and boots and Tyrolean hats and a stick. We foresee some folks just outright running like hell, possibly, Rod. We foresee homemade wagons piled high with worldly goods. We foresee BMW war-surplus motorcycles with sidecars and guys in goggles and leather helmets. We foresee the occasional skateboard. We foresee a strictly temporary breakdown in the thin veneer of civilization over the souls of essentially frightened stampeding animals. We foresee looting, shooting, price-gouging, ethnic tensions, promiscuous sex, births in transit.

SEC. H.E.W.: Rollerblades I think you mean, Marty.

SEC. TRANSP.: All feedback and input welcome, Trent. Someone junior in the office foresaw hang-gliders. I don't foresee demographically significant hang-gliding,

personally, at this juncture. Nor I need to stress do we foresee anything you could call true refugees.

GENTLE: Hhhaaahh hhhuuuhhhhhhh.

TINE: Absolutely not, Mart. No way a downer-association-rife term like refugee is going to be applicable here.

Quite an ear, Foster Wallace had. I guess the shorter version of my problems with the Sierra Club is that I can just see them at this meeting, proposing that catapults made out of wood be used ("sustainable!") or that the plexiglass wall be painted with colorful murals, possibly by schoolchildren.

NOTE *** I should know, but don't, the permitting regime that a private corridor would run under. One can only believe that it would be even more lax than the permitting process under which our state-owned/privately operated landfill has been run, a process marked by the reversal of Maine's solid waste hierarchy, which by statute makes landfills a last resort, not a first, and also marked by the corruption of state and local government in the forms of the revolving door, fees for lawyers and "consultants," secret contract amendments, meetings run for *years* with no bylaws, a general lack of transparency and accountability, and a Katahdin-high mountain of bullshit from the operator about their plans and intentions.

Oh, and they sited the thing near the Penobscot, so when the liner fails, as all landfill liners do, the best case scenario is that the quality of our surface water would be sacrificed. I go on like this to show the nature of our local oligarchy. All I can say in defense is of our local oligarchy is that Maine is so poor they never engineered a housing bubble.

NOTE **** Some speculate that the East West Corridor would hook up to a proposed Enbridge tar sands pipeline running through Michigan and up through Ontario and Quebec, terminating at Eastport. An alternative would be to use an existing aircraft fuel pipeline running from Quebec south and terminating in Portland, but that pipeline is old, its flow direction would need to be reversed, and not its necessarily suitable for tar sands oil.

NOTE ***** There is one possibility: Mineral mines [7]. It's not clear to me that the potential gold mine in Aroostook County is on the route, however. Although I suppose it could be! There is, however, a certain beauty to the concept of (just guessing) Irving Canada bootstrapping its private highway with the proceeds from the gold mine it owns.

NOTE ***** Vigue, when he's not presenting to Chamber of Commerce types, comes off as touchy and paranoid. Was it *really* necessary to call in the police from all the surrounding towns at a so-called open meeting? And then pre-clear all questions from citizens, instead of having an open mike?

UPDATE In discussing the jobs the Corridor would bring to Maine, I have just realized I forgot to mention the security guards, and apparatus, needed to patrol the fence. My bad.



UPDATE Minor edits for typos and clarity.

Attachment **Size**

 [catapult.jpg](#)^[8] 72.22 KB

 [tower.jpg](#)^[9] 119.45 KB





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[3] <http://www.environmentmaine.org/media/mee/15-reasons-east-west-highway-will-never-be-built>

[4] <http://www.dailybulldog.com/db/opinion/politics-other-mistakes-between-the-ditches/>

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