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OPEGA Report Reflects Positively on Maine Turnpike Authority MTA ALREADY IMPLEMENTING SEVERAL RECOMMENDED IMPROVEMENTS

AUGUSTA, Maine – Following eight months of rigorous, broad-ranging review, the Maine Legislature’s Office of Program Evaluation & Government Accountability (OPEGA) today released a report examining Maine Turnpike Authority (MTA) operations, policies and procedures.

The OPEGA review, which covered the five-year period from 2005-2009, audited the MTA on issues ranging from debt level, operating surplus and construction services procurement, to accounting principles, agency oversight and governance. OPEGA acknowledged a number of the MTA’s strengths while also noting a few areas for improvement, particularly with regard to professional service contracts, budgeting, and travel and subsistence expenditures, all of which the MTA has taken steps to address and will continue to focus on in the months ahead.

“Not all of (MTA’s) proposed actions exactly mirror OPEGA’s recommendations, but in our opinion they are reasonable, both in scope and timeframe, for addressing the issues we have raised,” the OPEGA report notes. “If effectively implemented, they should strengthen MTA’s processes, begin to substantially redefine the relationship with (professional services contractor) HNTB, and bring additional transparency to MTA’s budget and expenditures.”

“We note that some actions being taken by MTA go beyond the scope of OPEGA’s recommendations and will provide for additional improvements and efficiencies,” the report continues. “We see this as an indication that MTA is truly interested in fully integrating the changes in a way that impacts MTA’s culture and makes it a stronger organization.”

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Overall the OPEGA report presents a positive picture of the MTA and the quality of work performed by its staff. It also notes several areas where the MTA has been able to cut costs over the past several years. For example, from 2005 to 2009 the MTA's travel and subsistence expenditures have declined by 68 percent, work performed by others is down 37 percent, and consulting engineering fees and expenses have dropped 24 percent.

The MTA's quasi-governmental status presented OPEGA with a dilemma: whether to measure the MTA according to standards followed by state agencies such as the Maine Department of Transportation, or those ascribed to private business enterprises. In the end, OPEGA held the MTA accountable to *both* sets of standards and its findings were largely complimentary of the agency.

"It was an enlightening experience that reaffirmed the MTA's many positive attributes while identifying areas we all agreed could use some improvements," responded MTA Chairman Gerard P. Conley Sr. and Executive Director Paul Violette in a joint letter to the legislature's Government Oversight Committee. "To that end, several MTA practices will be formalized and, where needed, new policies and procedures will be created—all with an eye toward increased transparency and accountability."

Among the changes the MTA has begun working on are increasing the size of its in-house engineering staff to assume more construction inspection and project oversight responsibilities, thus being less reliant on outside consultants; developing new contract management software and procedures; and implementing more stringent travel, meal and general purchasing policies.

A detailed action plan specifically addressing OPEGA's recommendations—and endorsed by both OPEGA and the MTA—was included in the MTA's response portion of the report.