

Majority Report - Final

August 23, 2023

To: Maine DOT Commissioner Bruce Van Note
From: Lower Road Rail Use Advisory Council
RE: The Lower Road Rail Corridor Use Advisory Council Study: Brunswick to Augusta

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the RUAC process, established in 23 MRSA Section 7107 of the State Railroad Preservation Act. The council was formed upon petition from municipalities along the state-owned rail corridor and the Merrymeeting Trail Board of Supervisors.

Attached is the final VHB report of the Lower Road RUAC, which includes an outline of the council's methodology and data. This memo summarizes the majority report's key recommendations that are based on the council's nine-month study of the options for use of the Lower Road rail corridor.

By a vote of 11 of the 14 members, the Rail Use Advisory Council (RUAC) for the state-owned rail corridor from Brunswick to Augusta, the 33.5-mile section beginning with railroad milepost 29.45 in Brunswick and ending with milepost 63.04 in Augusta, referred to as the "Lower Road," recommends as follows:

The Lower Road Rail Use Advisory Council majority report recommends the conversion of 33.5 miles of existing state-owned railroad track to an Interim Trail.

This trail may be surfaced with stone dust or paved and be primarily for non-motorized use. During DOT's trail planning process, the RUAC further recommends that the Commissioner work with the Merrymeeting Trail Board of Supervisors and individual towns to identify potential trail segments where limited motorized use may be permitted, such as where there is space for dual trails.

It is further recommended that any trail developed should not interfere with the current lease with the City of Augusta Parking District.

It is also noted that the first mile of the rail line in Brunswick is currently leased to Mid Coast Rail and the commissioner may wish to consider a rail-with-trail option for that section if the lease is to be continued.

Eleven members of the council recommend the Interim Trail option; three members recommend the Rail-with-Trail option; 0 members recommend the state continue maintaining the corridor for rail use only.

As required by Section 75, council membership included representatives of the municipalities along the rail corridor, rail and trail advocates, representatives from state agencies, regional planners, and statewide tourism professionals, supported by staff from Maine DOT and chaired

by the commissioner’s designee. The council was assisted by consultants VHB and RKG. Over the nine-month period of this study, the 14-member council met monthly, accepting public comment at all meetings, and a public hearing was held June 22, 2023, on the draft version of this report.

According to its statutory purpose, the council met to facilitate discussion, gather information, and provide advice to the commissioner regarding future use of this rail corridor for rail use, trail use or bikeways. According to the State Rail Preservation Act, the corridor must be preserved for eventual rail use, but can be repurposed on an interim basis for an alternative use such as a trail, as provided in Chapter 615. The two trail options under consideration were an “Interim Trail,” which utilizes the existing rail corridor in place of the rails, or a “Rail-with-Trail,” built beside the existing tracks.

Concurrent and previous rail studies also provided key information – particularly the Bangor Propensity Study, presented April 11, 2023, to the Legislature’s Transportation Committee by Maine DOT. [https://www.maine.gov/mdot/ofps/portland-bangor-study/_assets/docs/Bangor%20Memo%20and%20Propensity%20Study%20April%202023.pdf]

In that testimony, Maine DOT concluded that, given the relatively low transit demand, low population densities, high capital and operating costs, low climate and equity benefits, and extensive transportation needs statewide, extending passenger rail service from Portland to Bangor on the Lower Road is not currently economically feasible.

Though the Lower Road RUAC study does not include a figure for annual operating costs, MDOT’s April 11, 2023, testimony for the Bangor Propensity Study to the Transportation Committee estimated that annual operating costs for passenger service could be as high as \$18.6 million. Ongoing operational subsidies could be in the range of \$6.7 million to \$16.2 million per year.

In terms of potential federal subsidies for passenger rail, Maine DOT told the Transportation Committee that the state’s demographics and lack of highway traffic congestion put Maine at competitive disadvantage for federal rail funds, and expanding bus service would provide for the region’s transportation needs more equitably and affordably. Maine DOT further recommended a pilot study of expanded intercity bus service and was joined in this recommendation by the Bangor Area Comprehensive Transportation System (BACTS).

As the basis for its recommendations, the Majority Report of the Lower Road RUAC cites the following key findings:

- Restoration of passenger rail along the 33.5-mile Lower Road is estimated to cost \$363 million, and the high annual estimate for ridership by 2040 is 87,650 trips per year, or just 240 trips per day. Yearly maintenance costs are estimated at \$3 million. (These costs were defined by VHB at the Lower Road RUAC’s January 25, 2023, presentation as rail, track, and signal system maintenance.) [https://www.maine.gov/mdot/ofps/ruac/lowerroad/docs/Lower%20Road%20RUAC%20Mtg_230125-presentation.pdf]

- Bus service in the corridor between Bangor and Portland had a pre-pandemic annual ridership of 152,000 in 2019, with capacity for expanded service.
- Passenger service on this line ceased in 1960. In the 1980's, Guilford Transportation consolidated its freight operations to the Back Road through Lewiston/Auburn, discontinuing freight on the Lower Road. Guilford filed for abandonment of the Lower Road, but the state acquired the line before that process was completed. Since the state acquired the line, other than three short-line operators, no commercial carrier has expressed interest in the Lower Road for either freight or passengers.
- An Interim Trail on the Lower Road using the existing rail corridor is estimated to cost \$34.3 million for a stone-dust surface and \$43 million for a paved surface. Yearly maintenance costs are estimated at \$80,400-\$134,000 for paved surface and \$93,800-147,400 for gravel/stone dust surface.
- A Rail-with-Trail on the Lower Road would be much more expensive and is estimated to cost \$146.3 million for a stone-dust surface and \$151.8 million for a paved surface, and would have significant environmental impacts. Yearly maintenance cost estimates are the same as for the Interim Trail option.
- The Lower Road corridor contains three major rivers (the Androscoggin, Cathance, and Kennebec), seven perennial streams, and numerous wetlands. Using the existing rail corridor without the expansions necessary for a Rail-with-Trail configuration would have significantly less environmental impact.
- Maine DOT's most recent State Rail Plan does not recommend reinstating passenger or freight rail service on the Lower Road. Maine DOT's 2023 Active Transportation Plan designates the Lower Road as a high priority corridor for interim use as a bicycle and pedestrian trail.
- According to Maine DOT, Amtrak's fifteen-year plan has no provision for expanding passenger service through either the Lower Road or the Back Road.
- The Lower Road rail corridor affords spectacular views and opportunities to access waterways and would connect to other Maine trail systems and the East Coast Greenway, making it a scenic trail of state and national significance.
- 205 individuals provided public comments during the RUAC process. Approximately 81 percent favored any Interim Trail option; 3 percent specifically favored the Rail-with-Trail option; 11 percent favored rail use; 4 percent were neutral or asked questions.

The state has owned this corridor for more than 30 years, and the communities along it want to see this valuable but dormant asset utilized for the benefit of the people of this region and the state. The RUAC majority finds that there would be significant health, economic, environmental, and transportation benefits of an Interim Trail utilizing the Lower Road rail corridor, and therefore, recommends creation of an Interim Trail.