

John T. Sutton
Belgrade
LD 404

LD 404 Testimony (May 17, 2023)

To: Honorable Chairs and Members of Maine Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Transportation

From: John T. Sutton, Belgrade Maine

Subject: Please vote NO on LD 404, to avoid wrecking the Mountain Division Rail Corridor for a trail!

I am past-president and a current board member of MRG, Inc., (Maine Rail Group) and presently involved in MRG's New England Railroad map project plus efforts to productively utilize Maine's railroad corridors. I previously represented MRG on the board of Maine Better Transportation Association (MBTA), and participated in many meetings of the Rt. 113 Corridor Committee of GPCOG and officials of Saco River Valley towns, to restore and promote business development along Maine's Mountain Division rail line. I served on the Mountain Division RUAC and wrote its minority report objecting to its recommendation for conversion to trail

Please vote NO on LD 404 to convert the Mountain Division rail corridor to trail.

Here's why:

- Restoration of the idle Mountain Division and other key Maine-owned corridors to productive rail use will best serve Maine's long-term transportation, environmental, business development and tourism goals;

- The Mountain Division RUAC considered only Maine's state-owned part of the line, which was built to connect the ocean at Portland with Great Lakes via St. Johnsbury, Vermont;

- The MD RUAC committee was overweighted with trail interests;

- MD RUAC recommendations based on costs of trail construction vs. rail restoration introduce false comparisons, which ignore the long-term transport, environmental, economic and tourism advantages of rail versus recreational trail;

- The term "interim" trail use is misleading. History and political reality suggest vanishingly small chances of return to rail use after corridors are converted from rail to recreational trails.

- Trail conversion would erase these and other potential Mountain Division rail opportunities:

- ☐ Maine Freight

- ☐ Cement, potable water, lumber, fuel pellets, aggregates, other fuels;

- ☐ Regional Passenger

- ☐ Commuter to and from Portland; Potential business increases for Downeaster, Vermonter and Amtrak nationally; Tourism interests jointly for Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont; Link to Conway Scenic Railroad for rail access to national system, Amtrak link to nation-wide tourist opportunities; potential to attract tourists nationally and internationally without their personal cars (a former ME DOT goal); Note current Midcoast RailService project to re-establish passenger service on the Rockland Branch with self-powered coaches as an example for the Mountain Division and elsewhere in Maine, (with existing rail infrastructure?). Maine TIDC (Transportation Infrastructure Durability Center) interests in alternative green power sources (batteries, H2), with railroad applications.

- Also note: Parallel trails are welcome where they do not destroy valuable railroad infrastructure, or adversely affect safe operation, maintenance and economic viability of railroad functions. A compromise solution for rail with trail was seriously discussed by the MD RUAC, but ultimately dismissed because of necessary diversions with added costs for conversion to trail.