

Testimony in support of LD 209: Resolve, to Direct the Department of Transportation to Implement the Recommendation of the Portland to Auburn Rail Use Advisory Council

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Senator Chipman, Representative Williams, and Members of the Transportation Committee:

My name is Derek Strout and I am a resident of Portland and a staff member at Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. I am writing to testify in strong support of Rep. Bell's proposed amendment to LD 209, "Resolve, to Direct the Department of Transportation to Implement the Recommendation of the Portland to Auburn Rail Use Advisory Council."

Originally from Bar Harbor, I've lived in Maine most of my life and one of the main reasons my wife and I have chosen to raise our family here is the quality of life that comes with the state's commitment and investment in parks and trails. We use local and regional trails all year round for recreation, stress-relief, adventure, education and getting to local destinations like the Portland Children's Museum safely and enjoyably. We agree with the Rail Use Advisory Council (RUAC) and communities along the route that the best current use of this corridor is a wide, flat trail, accessible to people of all ages and abilities.

Though we live in Portland, we have friends whose property abuts the corridor further north who could not be more excited about the option of a trail passing right behind them. If given a safe option like this rail-trail to see friends or go to lunch in Yarmouth or New Gloucester without driving, we would use it all the time.

This Berlin Subdivision Rail Corridor offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to improve the lives of residents and visitors between Portland and Auburn and is a critical element of the state's recently released Maine State Active Transportation Plan, which states that, "A robust AT system statewide will support the Maine Climate Action Plan and the Maine Economic Development Strategy 2020-2029 and enhance the vibrancy of Maine's cities, quintessential villages, and rural areas."

The health benefits alone of trails has been well documented, as has the economic impacts, including that of similar projects like the Eastern Trail, which has been found to inject over \$44 million annually to the region.

While there are often questions about the legality and safety of new rail-trails, I would like to suggest that many of these concerns can be alleviated by looking at the successes and techniques from any of the over 2,000 rail-trails already being used by millions across the country. While the Casco Bay Trail is a unique project in many ways, the process of improving rights-of-way like this is not new, and countless studies have shown that many of the fears surrounding privacy and safety simply do not reflect the reality of how trails are used. The Belfast Rail Trail and Mountain Division Trail are two other success stories from right here in Maine that demonstrate how safe and valuable these trails can be.

As you know, the Rail Use Advisory Council's recommendation also honors the state's Rail Preservation Act, which requires rail-trail conversions be considered an interim use of the corridor. I would suggest that the main reason train service isn't often restored in conversions like these is that rather than being a sort of neglected temporary fix, the rail-trails have become beloved, well-used, economic drivers in those communities. And that is exactly what I believe this corridor would become.

You have an incredible opportunity with this bill and I hope we can pass it to realize the enormous benefits offered by the Casco Bay Trail and create a transformational active transportation and recreational pathway for current and future generations of Mainers and visitors.

Thank you,

Derek M. Strout
Portland