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Ladies and gentlemen of the Maine Committee of Financial Affairs and Appropriations, I stand before you today with a passionate belief in the immense value of our Maine-owned railroads. It is disheartening to see rail projects consistently overlooked in favor of road bonds in the past. However, this session, I am hopeful that the importance of Maine's railroads has been recognized and given due consideration. I commend you for the attention you have given to the various bills regarding rail transportation and recreational trails, as these discussions hold tremendous significance.

This is not simply a matter of state policy and investment; it holds the key to driving local economies and maximizing returns on our state resources. Now is not the time to hastily tear up railroads without careful thought and planning. We have heard a multitude of voices from diverse backgrounds, including businesses, recreational enthusiasts, and environmental advocates, all expressing their desire for a \$30 million trails Bond. This sounds like an excellent opportunity, as long as it does not entail the destruction of our valuable rail infrastructure.

Maine is currently in a unique position when it comes to transportation infrastructure investment. With the expected \$400 million special purpose general fund bonding, we have the chance to match an incredible \$1 billion in federal funding. In addition, let us not forget the previous \$500 million in federal pandemic subsidies for roads and bridges. The Maine Department of Transportation does not require further bonding for these purposes. This surplus bonding capacity presents us with an opportunity to explore alternative funding avenues, such as trails and, yes, even rails. We can design projects that encompass both, creating what are known as Greenbelts—corridors that accommodate various modes of transportation, including passenger rail.

Rails with Trails projects have been successfully implemented in other parts of the nation. By securing funding from the Federal Transit Administration's GIG program, we can create a comprehensive transportation system that encourages multi-modal travel, specifically benefiting passenger rail. The services industry is rapidly growing in Maine, with thousands of new jobs emerging in the Portland working waterfront alone. These service businesses, ranging from schools to hospitals to high-tech industries, thrive in town centers throughout the state. It is imperative that we provide efficient and accessible means for people to reach these vital locations.

Maine is fortunate to own 125 miles of railroad infrastructure, spanning four transportation corridors and connecting over 25 village centers along these routes. These centers offer prime opportunities for service industries to establish themselves and contribute to the growth of our local communities. They provide spaces for housing, services, education, and, of course, recreation. Imagine a Greenbelt design that stretches from the Portland downtown waterfront, encompassing 30 miles to Auburn, and connecting the vibrant town centers of Falmouth and Yarmouth. This design would seamlessly integrate with the Downeaster at Yarmouth Junction, pass through Cumberland and Pownal at Pineland, and extend to the Auburn-Lewiston municipal airport. Furthermore, it would pave the way for a route to the north, leading through Bethel and ultimately reaching Montreal.

We have an incredible opportunity before us, and it would be a tremendous loss to let it slip away. Therefore, I propose that we unite both the trails and rails bonds into a single, reasonable amount. Let us work together to create the most splendid Greenbelt in the Northeast, simultaneously funding outdoor trails across the entire state. It is crucial that we engage in discussions regarding the optimal utilization of our state-owned railroads, taking into account the interests of all stakeholders involved.

Maine has the potential to become a shining example of a state that embraces sustainable and multi-modal transportation systems. Let us seize this opportunity to invest in our future, supporting economic growth, environmental sustainability, and

enhanced connectivity. I urge you to consider the invaluable benefits that can be achieved by combining both trails and rails bonds into a unified vision for Maine's transportation infrastructure. By doing so, we can foster a sense of unity and collaboration, forging ahead to create a model Greenbelt that serves as a testament to our commitment to sustainable, accessible, and interconnected modes of travel. Let us not only discuss but actively pursue the best utilization of our state-owned railroads, ensuring that future generations can reap the benefits of a well-designed and comprehensive transportation network. Together, we can build a brighter and more prosperous future for the great state of Maine. Thank you.