

Testimony in support of LD 29: Resolve, to Require the Department of Transportation to Implement the Recommendations of the Lower Road Rail Use Advisory Council

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Senator Nangle, Representative Crafts, and members of the Transportation Committee:

My name is Derek Strout, and I am writing to testify in strong support of LD 29 as presented by President Daughtry and cosponsored by Representative Cluchey.

One of the main reasons my wife and I have chosen to stay in Maine to raise our family 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), community leaders, and community members along the route that the best current use of this languishing, state-owned corridor is a proper multi-use trail, accessible to people of all ages and abilities.

Though we live in Portland, we often seek out great multi-use trails outside Cumberland County, and the proposed Merrymeeting Trail would be an amazing new addition to the region. If given a safe option like this rail-trail to walk, bike, or cross-country ski along the Kennebec River, we certainly would.

The Lower Road corridor offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to improve the lives of residents and visitors between Brunswick and Gardiner 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 have 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 and loved 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 to be considered an interim use of the corridor. I would suggest, based on countless first-hand stories from regions like southern Maine, that the primary reason

train service isn't often restored in conversions like these is that the new trail remains the best use of that corridor for its residents and visitors. Rather than being a sort of neglected temporary fix, rail-trails have become beloved, well-used, economic drivers in those communities. And that is exactly what I believe this corridor will become.

You have an incredible opportunity with this bill, and I hope we can pass it to realize the enormous benefits offered by this new trail project, especially as a major connector trail of the greater Casco Bay Trail vision, of which other pieces are being brought before you today.

Please support LD 29 as a transformative active transportation and recreational pathway for current and future generations of Mainers and visitors.

Thank you,

Derek M. Strout and family
Portland