

Chairman Nangle, Chairwoman Crafts, President Daughtry, and honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation of the 132nd Maine Legislature:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on LD 29 today, and thank you to Representative Cluchey in particular for sponsoring this important legislation. My name is Lisandro Berry Gaviria, and I am a registered voter from Bowdoinham. I have long supported the proposal to convert the Brunswick-to-Gardiner section of the Lower Road rail corridor into a multi-use trail called the Merrymeeting Trail (“the MMT”). While earning my B.A. in economics at the University of Notre Dame, I conducted in-depth research on the health benefits, safety improvements, and economic stimulation that rail-trails like the proposed MMT can bring to their communities. All three of these factors weigh heavily in favor of the Lower Road Rail Use Advisory Council’s recommendation.

As a well-situated and accessible rail-trail, the MMT would provide an opportunity for substantial health benefits in the local population at a time when outdoor recreation and exercise have become critical to combating the health issue of physical inactivity. Because rail-trails provide safe and scenic places to exercise that people might not otherwise have access to, there is strong empirical evidence that their creation significantly increases activity levels among sedentary and already-active people alike.<sup>1</sup> This increase in physical activity has the effect of reducing the massive healthcare costs associated with a sedentary lifestyle by amounts that far exceed the actual cost of constructing the trail.<sup>2</sup>

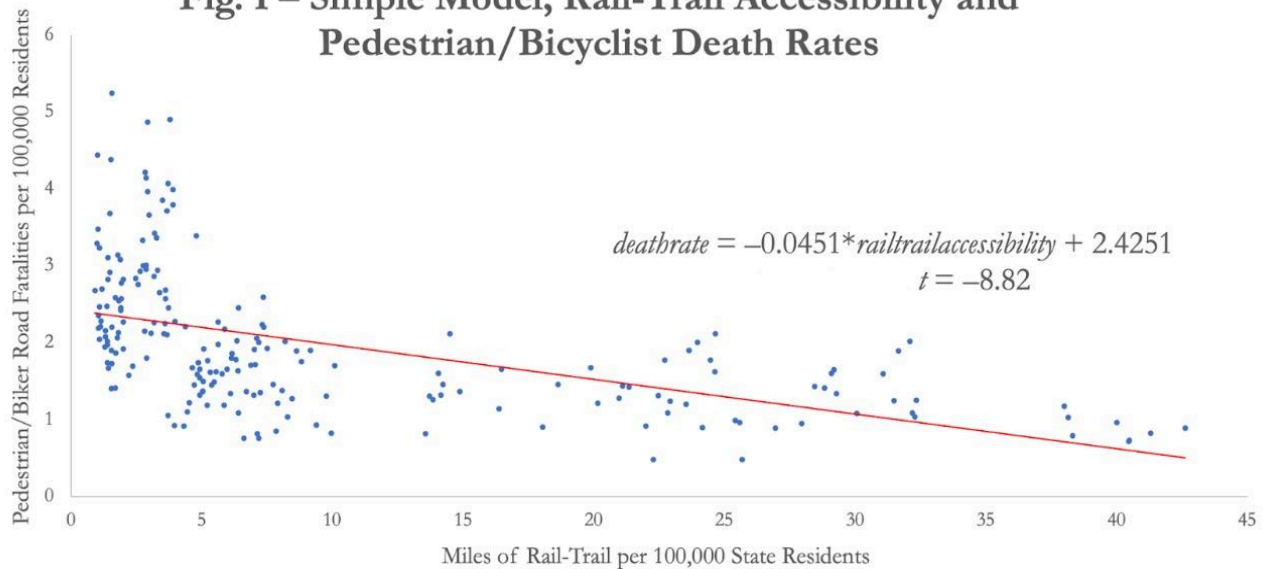
The MMT also has the potential to reduce the safety risks associated with road use by pedestrians and cyclists. Thousands of Americans die or are seriously injured on the roads each year because of motorist negligence or unsafe infrastructure. Many of these casualties could be prevented if people engaging in recreational exercise or active transportation had a safe, off-road alternative such as a rail-trail. I have personally conducted a statistical analysis of nationally reported non-motorist fatality rates from 2015 to 2021 in all 50 states and the District of Columbia which demonstrates this dynamic. As the regression model on the following page indicates, there is a statistically significant negative correlation between the prevalence of rail-trails in a given state and that state’s non-motorist fatality rate. That is to say, having more miles of trail per person usually means fewer pedestrians and bikers are killed by motor vehicles.

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<sup>1</sup> Abildso, Christiaan, et al. “Assessing the cost-effectiveness of a community rail-trail in achieving physical activity gains.” *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2012, pp. 102–113.

<sup>2</sup> VanBlarcom, Brian, and Janmaat, John. “Comparing the costs and health benefits of a proposed rail trail.” *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2013, pp. 187–206.

**Fig. I – Simple Model, Rail-Trail Accessibility and Pedestrian/Bicyclist Death Rates**



Furthermore, studies of existing rail-trails show that they bring tremendous economic benefits to the surrounding communities. The net economic value of such trails is consistently in the millions of dollars per year.<sup>3</sup> For instance, the Virginia Creeper National Recreation Trail is a rail-trail comparable in its length and geographic characteristics to the proposed MMT. This trail has been estimated to generate \$1.6 million in regional economic output for every 1,000 tourist visits (over and above revenue generated by local use).<sup>4</sup> MMT tourism would likely have a similar impact on economic activity in the Merrymeeting Bay region, particularly benefiting dozens of small businesses in the downtowns of Brunswick, Topsham, Bowdoinham, Richmond, and Gardiner. Once completed, 46% of Maine’s population would live within 30 miles of the combined Merrymeeting Trail and Kennebec River Rail Trail system, making it a fantastic destination for intrastate tourism.

As I am sure you are well aware, the Maine Rail Preservation Act explicitly allows for MDOT-owned rail lines to be dismantled and converted for alternative use in cases where removal of the rail infrastructure will not have a demonstrably negative impact on the surrounding region or its economy. Of course, the Lower Road corridor between Brunswick and Gardiner adds no economic value to the area in its current state of disuse and disrepair. Given the lack of any evidence of sufficient consumer demand to justify the massively expensive project of restoring commercial rail service on the corridor, given the fact that 86% of Mainers support interim use of dormant rail

<sup>3</sup> Siderelis, Christos, and Moore, Roger. “Outdoor Recreation Net Benefits of Rail-Trails.” *Journal of Leisure Research*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1995, 344-359.

<sup>4</sup> Bowker, J.M., et al. “Estimating the economic value and impacts of recreational trails: a case study of the Virginia Creeper Rail Trail.” *Tourism Economics*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2007, pp. 241–260.

corridors as recreational trails,<sup>5</sup> and given the wide-ranging and well-documented benefits of rail-trails that I have outlined above, I strongly urge the Committee to approve the Lower Road RUAC's recommendation that this section of the corridor be converted to a stone dust or paved multi-use trail for the foreseeable future.

This concludes my testimony today. I thank you for your thoughtful consideration of my perspective and for your service to our great state.

Respectfully,

Lisandro Berry Gaviria

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<sup>5</sup> "Polling shows Mainers support trails." Maine Trails Coalition, [www.mainetrailscoalition.org/public-opinion](http://www.mainetrailscoalition.org/public-opinion).