

Transportation Committee Hearing: LD 956 Testimony - Public Hearing 3/4/25

Sunrise Trail Coalition – Vivian Noakes

Senator Nangle, Representative Crafts, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation:

My name is Vivian Noakes, I live in Addison, ME and I am the Outreach Coordinator for the Sunrise Trail Coalition. The Sunrise Trail Coalition advocates for and manages the development of the Downeast Sunrise Trail. Through my work as a Rural Youth Organizer for Just Maine for Just Us, I gained insight into the transportation challenges youth face in Washington County. Today I, on behalf of the Sunrise Trail Coalition and as a young car-free person in Washington County, am testifying in support of LD 956 and the interim trail that it will create while preserving the Calais Branch Corridor for future potential rail use.

In 2023, tourism generated over \$9 billion in direct spending in Maine, contributing to a total economic impact of \$16.4 billion and supporting 131,000 jobs. Within Maine, multi-use trails provide a positive economic boost for urban and rural areas alike. Tourism is already a significant economic driver for Down East Maine, and expansion of the Down East Sunrise Trail is a strategic investment in that sector. As part of the final report prepared for the Calais Branch Rail Use Advisory Council, an economic analysis prepared by RKG Associates (*Page 12 - Calais Branch Rail Corridor Study*:

<https://uploads.mainedotpima.com/2805a0dc-9052-4c02-a4fc-41d6c3b517be.pdf>) estimated that annual spending for out of area users on this new section of trail would fall between \$980K and \$1.47 million. These estimates for the proposed trail are bolstered by the calculated economic impacts from existing trails in the state, like the Eastern Trail in Southern Maine. In 2021 the Eastern Trail's economic impact from visitor spending by net new users was calculated to be over \$14.3 million within southern Maine. (Page 5 - Economic Impacts of the Eastern Trail: <https://www.easterntail.org/documents/Nov2021ETEconomicImpactReport.pdf>).

Long distance trails aren't just an asset to tourists though, they can also help to draw in new residents and retain existing ones. A 2019 study from Headwaters Economics found that the availability of recreational opportunities can often make a difference between gaining or losing population, particularly for rural counties, nationwide. (Recreation Counties Attracting New

Residents and Higher incomes:

<https://headwaterseconomics.org/wp-content/uploads/recreation-counties-attract-report.pdf>).

The Downeast Sunrise Trail is an important asset when considering the needs of youth and other communities who have limited access to transportation. In rural communities transportation is essential, and as we have limited access to public transportation, the trail provides a safe artery for those who walk, bike, and use off road vehicles. When I used to live in the Calais area, I would see ATVs driving on the side of the road on the way to Calais. The side of the berm was thin and cars had to drive around the ATVs, I remember noticing that this was an unsafe situation. I would see the armada of ATVs parked at the sole Walmart for miles. People use the Downeast Sunrise Trail to do their grocery shopping as well as recreation. Extending the multi-use trail is not only about recreation, but supporting the needs of our community and protecting their safety.

Growing up in Downeast Maine, I know that the topic of extending the trail has been in circulation for a long time. I also know that off-road vehicles are a huge part of our local communities' culture. I will never forget the spectacle of 20-30 off road vehicles coming into town and flooding the local eateries and swimming holes. This is what our people do for fun, to come together, enjoy one another, and visit with old friends. The issue of "what we do when we get to Calais" has always been there, as Calais is a major destination. The people have asked for this extension for many years, it is time to show that officials are listening to them.

The extension of the Down East Sunrise Trail, as enabled by LD 956, will expand recreational opportunities and local access for the benefit of several communities in DownEast Maine.