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Testimony of Rep. Maggie O'Neil presenting

LD 1170, Resolve, to Promote Passenger Rail for Commuters

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation

Senator Chipman, Representative Williams, and honorable members of the Transportation Committee, I am Representative Maggie O'Neil. I represent House District 129, part of Saco. Thank you for the opportunity to present **LD 1170, Resolve, to Promote Passenger Rail for Commuters**.

This proposal was designed by Thornton Academy senior Cole Cochrane. He serves as a youth member of the Climate Council's Transportation Working Group. Cole is focused on improving public transit infrastructure, and he has done a lot of research to develop this proposal. Cole and other young people have put support behind this bill because it brings a future focus to transportation and passenger rail that is needed.

Here's what the resolve does:

It creates a high-level vision and roadmap for passenger rail in Maine. It directs the Department of Transportation, in coordination with the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority (NNEPRA), to study improvements that would maximize use of passenger rail along the current Amtrak Downeaster line from Sanford to Brunswick. The study will identify goals and potential changes to our current passenger rail system that would make it easier and more accessible for locals to travel from town-to-town by train. The study will report back to the legislature by January 1, 2024, so that the committee will be able to act upon any recommendations.

The resolve sets out categories to consider, including:

1. Frequency of trips
2. Scheduling of trips
3. Affordable fares
4. Trip time competitive to personal vehicles
5. Station locations

6. Economic impacts
7. Carbon emission reductions
8. Equitable access to transportation

Here's why it is important:

This study will create a high-level roadmap for passenger rail in Maine through engagement with a diverse group of stakeholders. Right now, our process is geared toward short-term planning. We establish a handful of action items and work to cross those things off the list. We have an opportunity to better engage stakeholders and create a long-term, visionary roadmap for passenger rail in Maine. To solve any problem, we first need to gather information and input so that we can design the best possible solutions.

Today, you will hear that this kind of planning is not necessary and that the existing approach is sufficient. Here are three major opportunities to improve our current approach to passenger rail: (1) robust public input from commuters and area employers, (2) equitable access to transit infrastructure, and (3) reducing our carbon emissions.

1. Robust public input from commuters and employers

Passenger rail access would improve with more robust stakeholder input. Right now, NNEPRA has good plans in the pipeline. They are working on relocating the Portland station to shorten trip times. They have also discussed extending service from Brunswick to Rockland, building a new stop in West Falmouth, and adding one additional round trip to provide northbound service from Wells. Both those particular plans and our long-term goals would be improved by gathering public input about what local, city-to-city passengers need to utilize the existing network. With that input, we can create a more cohesive vision for passenger rail in Maine.

Through more robust input, we have an opportunity to (a) serve a more diverse group of passengers, (b) connect employers with potential workers, and (c) reduce our carbon emissions. Right now, the Amtrak Downeaster line is geared toward special occasions and tourism trips (e.g., to and from Boston), rather than local town-to-town commutes. The current Downeaster line stops in Brunswick, Freeport, Portland, OOB (seasonally), Saco-Biddeford, and Wells-Sanford – a convenient corridor for local residents making daily trips from town-to-town.

That's why it is so important to gather robust public input to identify changes we need to make the Downeaster accessible for local travelers, in addition to special occasions. Stakeholders in my community and others along the Amtrak line are very interested in increased access to passenger rail, both for their own commutes and for addressing our workforce crisis. With planning, we can design Amtrak trips that run at convenient times, charge affordable prices, and conveniently get us where we need to go. More community members will be able to access transportation to get to work, doctor appointments, and more. That's why it is so important to

gather robust public input to identify changes we need to make the Downeaster accessible for local travelers, in addition to special occasions.

Director Patricia Quinn from NNEPRA took time to meet with us about our goals for this bill. We were grateful for the conversation and information they provided. Later this year, NNEPRA will create a new Service Development Plan (SDP). The SDP is our list of action items for the next five years of the Downeaster. The plan sets up a pipeline for accessing federal funding for identified projects. The study we propose today will serve as a high-level guide to making those more specific, shorter-term decisions. We want to see a longer-term, visionary approach to passenger rail as we develop our next five-year plan.

As part of goal-setting, we will ask stakeholders: How can we equitably serve more Mainers with passenger rail? What time of day do we need to access trains to take advantage of passenger rail? What fares are affordable, and what trip times are practical to be able to choose a train over a car? How will we connect to our ultimate destination from the train station? Our long-term priorities will be formed via stakeholder input, including input from (a) local commuters traveling from town-to-town along the Amtrak line, and (b) local employers and chambers of commerce facing workforce challenges. This study is about identifying commuter needs and the ideal system needed to serve those needs to draw upon as we create our five-year plan.

2. Reduce carbon emissions

Transportation is Maine's largest source of carbon emissions. According to the Maine Won't Wait climate strategy, the transportation sector accounts for 54% of our emissions.¹ To reach our climate action goals as a state, we must promote low-carbon transportation solutions such as passenger rail.

Better access to passenger rail will further those goals. The section of highway along the Amtrak corridor from Brunswick to Sanford is likely our busiest stretch of highway for commuters in the state. To address our emissions, we need to take all possible steps to reduce vehicle miles traveled along this busy commuting corridor where greater density exists. We do that by creating a long-term vision for passenger rail and matching action items to those goals.

As noted above, our current approach to passenger rail prioritizes special occasion trips over routine, local town-to-town trips. Two main objectives in our current plan will extend the current line to Rockland line and add a West Falmouth stop. Those are helpful connections to make along the current line, especially for special occasions and tourism. However, they are not tailored to urgently meeting our climate goals.

As an example, Saco, where I live, is the busiest exit on the Turnpike. On weekday mornings, many drivers get on the highway and travel north to the Portland area. Although Saco has been

¹ https://www.maine.gov/future/sites/maine.gov/future/files/inline-files/MaineWontWait_December2020.pdf

the busiest exit for many years, the Downeaster does not currently have a trip coming from the south up to Portland. NNEPRA plans to add one northbound morning trip in 2025. An overall vision that incorporates climate impacts would have likely elevated a project like this one to reduce vehicle miles traveled. Long-term goals and stakeholder input would also improve the ways that we implement solutions, so we know they are addressing problems in the best way possible.

We all know that there's a red line we cannot cross in terms of warming temperatures, and we are in a battle for our lives where every moment counts. The decisions we make today about transportation policy, including passenger rail access, determine just how much loss and damage my generation and people younger than us will suffer. We need to be strategic about how we will give those drivers an affordable, convenient transit option as soon as possible.

3. Equitable access to transit infrastructure

Public transit infrastructure must serve all potential commuters, especially those with barriers to access. When I learned about our current priorities for passenger rail, I became concerned about limited input from community members who do not own and drive cars. I noted a serious lack of prioritization of lower-income residents in the Biddeford-Saco area and in the Sanford area. I grew up in the Biddeford-Saco area, and many of my peers are not able to be mobile and take advantage of regional job opportunities due to the lack of convenient and affordable transit. Although a new stop in West Falmouth closes an important gap along the line, we must also prioritize populations that do not have access to personal vehicles. For many of my peers, access to convenient, affordable transportation would mean access to a better job and better lives for their families. That lens is missing from our overall vision about commuter rail in Maine. Tourism is important; rail trips to Boston are important; *and* we need to be prioritizing access to passenger rail for all community members.

To sum up, this bill creates a roadmap for passenger rail in Maine. It will create a necessary high-level vision and bring in robust stakeholder input. As legislators, we bring the perspectives of our community members to the process. I hope to work with DOT and NNEPRA to increase public input and long-term vision as we set our goals for the next five years.

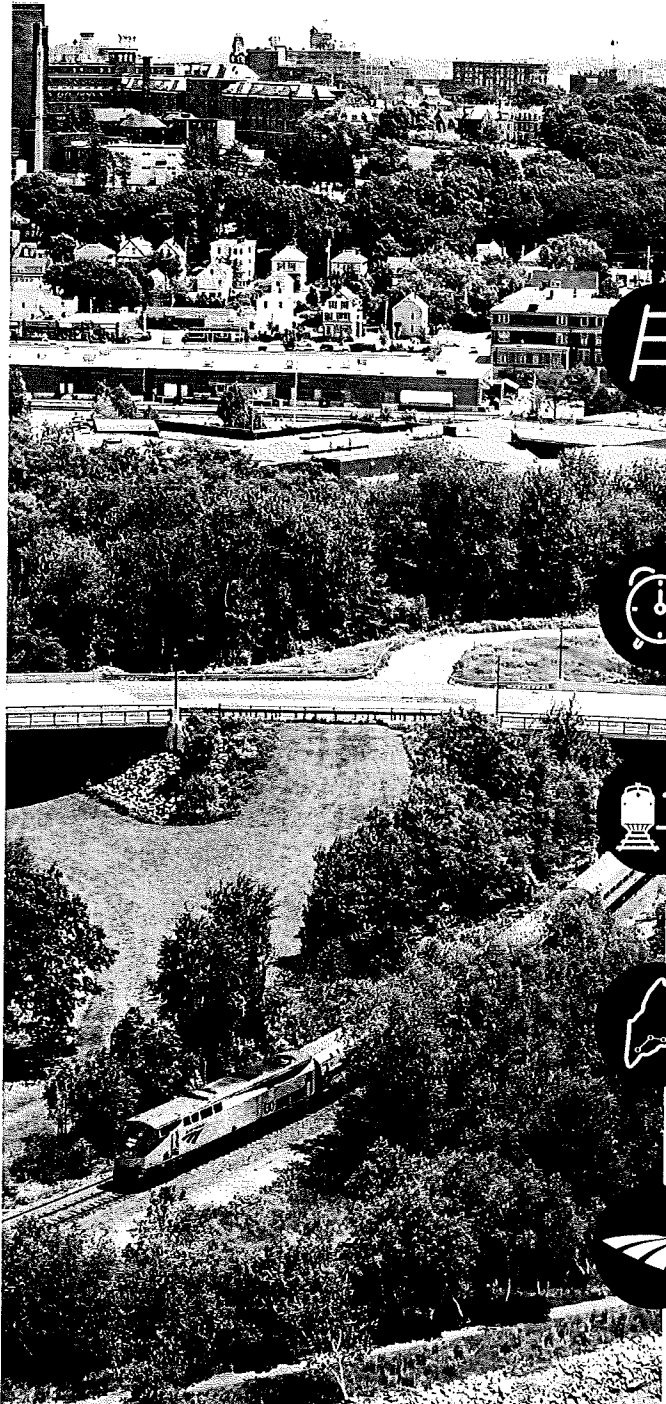
Thank you for your time.

NNEPRA Strategic Initiative

Projects to Support and Enhance the Downeaster Corridor



NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND
PASSENGER RAIL AUTHORITY



The NNEPRA team is committed to the sustained growth of the Amtrak Downeaster and is exploring innovative ways to improve mobility, advance safety, support a growing economy and provide value for the people of Maine and Northern New England.

More Trains; Better Reliability

Capacity improvements to improve reliability are underway. The Wells Area Improvement Project will support a new morning inbound Downeaster train between Wells and Brunswick making the Downeaster a car-free commuter option for workers in Maine.

Portland Station Relocation

NNEPRA is exploring mainline station alternatives which will improve Downeaster connectivity and within the greater Portland region by reducing overall travel time and decreasing bottleneck.

West Falmouth/Exit 53 Station Development

NNEPRA is exploring an additional Downeaster stop in West Falmouth at Exit 53, which would provide improved connectivity from the I-95 corridor.

Rockland Pilot Program

A pilot service operating 3 daily round-trips between Brunswick and Rockland is being pursued.

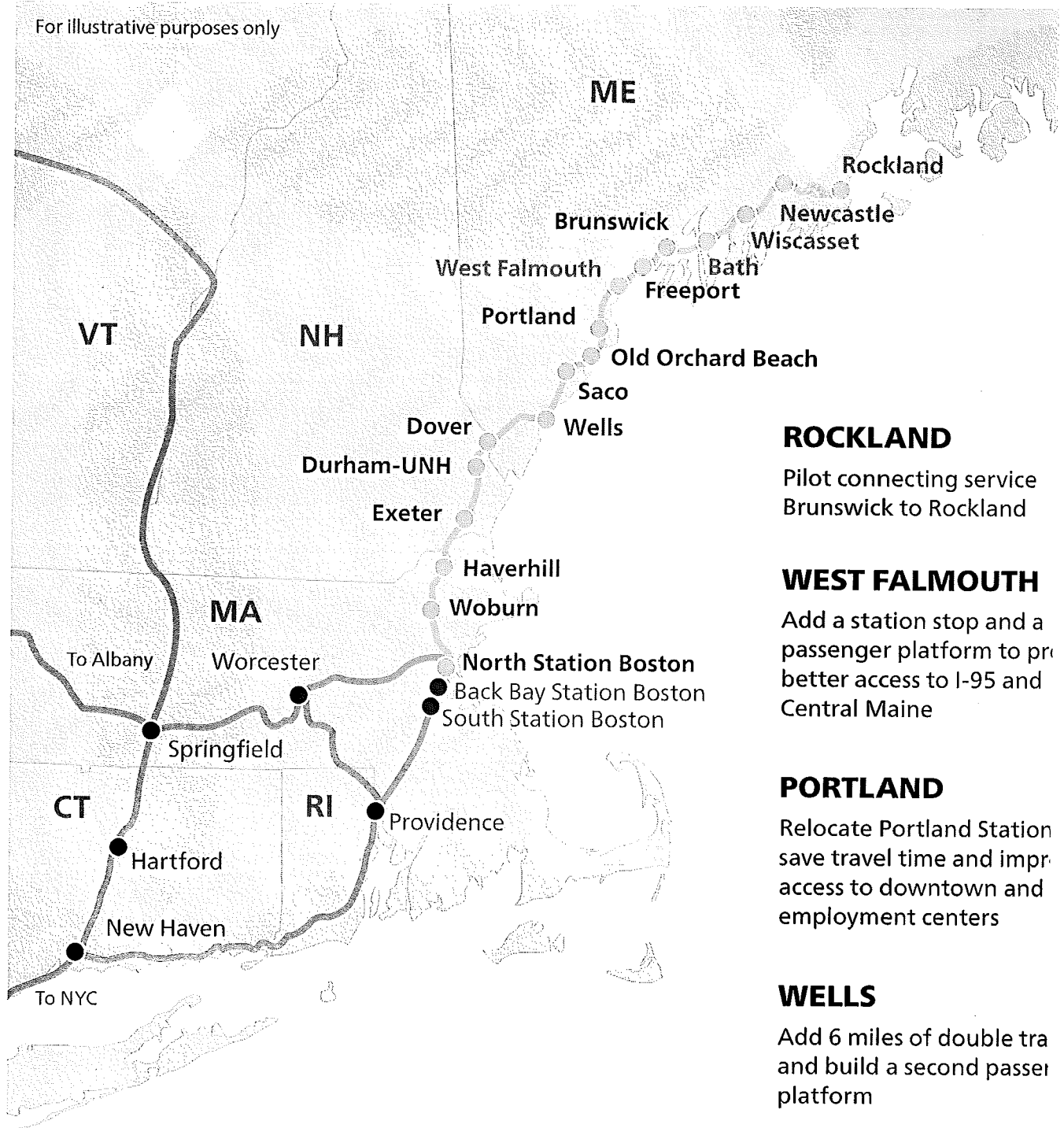
National Connections

Efforts are underway to simplify multi-modal transfers to the Amtrak Northeast Corridor and National Network.

NNEPRA Strategic Initiative

Projects to Support and Enhance the Downeaster Corridor

For illustrative purposes only



ROCKLAND

Pilot connecting service
Brunswick to Rockland

WEST FALMOUTH

Add a station stop and a
passenger platform to pro
better access to I-95 and
Central Maine

PORTLAND

Relocate Portland Station
save travel time and impr
access to downtown and
employment centers

WELLS

Add 6 miles of double tra
and build a second passer
platform

RAIL
MAP
KEY

Amtrak Downeaster
Route

Potential Passenger
Service Expansion

Amtrak NEC and
National Network



NORTHERN NEW