

May 18 Testimony by Edward Hanscom of Gardiner to the Joint Transportation Committee against LD 404: Resolve, to Direct the Department of Transportation to Implement the Recommendations of the Mountain Division Rail Use Advisory Council

Legislation over the years in Maine has consistently recognized that the highest and best use of railroad corridors is for rail transportation. They were designed and built to provide a uniquely efficient mode of transportation for people and goods, a purpose for which they continue to serve and will serve far into the future. The Maine Legislature has called on MaineDOT to preserve these lines for future rail use.

However, the removal of track from any rail corridor, as a practical matter, is the permanent destruction of the rail corridor. No Maine rail corridor converted to non-rail use in this way has ever been restored to rail service. The history of rail line preservation in Maine has shown that the only effective way to preserve lines for future rail use is to leave existing tracks in place.

The Mountain Division was built to connect the Portland area to New Hampshire, Vermont, and on to Montreal, as an interstate transportation corridor in an interstate transportation network. As such, the future of the Mountain Division should be a collaborative effort of all three states. Otherwise, shortsighted actions by one state or local entity could destroy the potential for future rail uses. The New Hampshire portion is operated by the Conway Scenic Railroad.

So, what has changed in favor of rail service restoration on the Mountain Division in Maine? One is the success of the Downeaster passenger rail service. Portland is a growing passenger rail destination, and passenger service, seasonal to Conway or year-round for the Greater Portland region is a natural complement to existing services that could reduce highway traffic congestion on several inland routes radiating from Portland. Another is the fact that Maine is experiencing one of the most sweeping changes of ownership and opportunity in the history of New England railroading --- the purchase of Pan Am Railways by CSX, the third largest freight railroad in North America. Until 2022, New England was largely the domain of regional railroads with very limited geographic reach or financial resources. Now that CSX has acquired Pan Am, the single-railroad reach for former Pan Am markets such as Portland now extends beyond New England to the entire East Coast, the Midwest, the Mississippi River basin, the Gulf Coast, and everything in between. The time and cost efficiencies gained by single-railroad access to half of the United States means expanded markets and business opportunities by creating economically competitive possibilities that never existed before. The same is true for the Mountain Division. With Portland as a CSX hub in Maine, rail freight generated on the Mountain Division could have much expanded market potential and benefit the local economy in lasting and meaningful ways --- such as new businesses with year-round jobs. The opportunity to capitalize on this transformation of the New England railroad landscape should not be missed. Maine's new State Rail Plan forecasts a tripling of rail freight traffic in Maine, and presence of CSX will be a major reason. The future of rail in Maine is bright. It's no time to rip up the tracks on the Mountain Division.

Conversion of this corridor to a trail will have negligible value for commuting and other everyday travel purposes. The distances involved are just too long. National statistics indicate that the average walk trip is well under a mile and the average bicycle trip is less than 3 miles. Biking or walking to work along this corridor is impractical for all but the most committed cyclists, and any trail that people are driving their cars and trucks to use is not doing anything to reduce vehicle-miles or fight climate change.

Reject LD 404. Instead, support LD 406, which recognizes the value of the Mountain Division.