



165 Main Street
P.O. Box 62
Damariscotta, ME 04543
207-209-4129

EDA designated economic development district

March 4, 2025

Joint Standing Committee on Transportation
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

Re: Support LD 29, a "Resolve, to Require the Department of Transportation to Implement the Recommendations of the Lower Road Rail Use Advisory Council."

Dear Sen. Nangle, Representative Lydia Crafts and Committee Members:

Please accept this letter as my testimony, as Chair of the Lower Road RUAC Committee and Executive Director of the Midcoast Council of Governments, in support of LD 29, a "Resolve, to Require the Department of Transportation to Implement the Recommendations of the Lower Road Rail Use Advisory Council."

By a vote of 11 of the 14 members, the Rail Use Advisory Council (RUAC) for the state-owned rail corridor from Brunswick to Augusta, the 33.5-mile section beginning with railroad milepost 29.45 in Brunswick and ending with milepost 63.04 in Augusta, referred to as the "Lower Road," recommends that the **existing state-owned railroad track be designated as an Interim Trail.**

Three members, in a minority report, recommend the Rail-with-Trail option; 0 members recommend the State continue maintaining the corridor for rail use only.

As required by Section 75, council membership included representatives of the municipalities along the rail corridor, rail and trail advocates, representatives from state agencies, regional planners, and statewide tourism professionals, supported by staff from Maine DOT and chaired by the commissioner's designee. The council was assisted by consultants VHB and RKG. Over the nine-month period of this study, the 14-member council met monthly, accepting public comment at all meetings, and a public hearing was held June 22, 2023, on the draft version of this report.

According to its statutory purpose, the council met to facilitate discussion, gather information, and provide advice to the commissioner regarding future use of this rail corridor for rail use, trail use or bikeways. According to the State Rail Preservation Act, the corridor must be preserved for eventual rail use but can be repurposed on an interim basis for an alternative use such as a trail, as provided in Chapter 615. The two trail options under consideration were an "Interim Trail," which utilizes the existing rail corridor in place of the rails, or a "Rail-with-Trail," built beside the existing tracks.

As the basis for its recommendations, the Majority Report of the Lower Road RUAC cites the following key findings:

- Restoration of passenger rail along the 33.5-mile Lower Road is estimated to cost \$363 million, and the high annual estimate for ridership by 2040 is 87,650 trips per year, or just 240 trips per day. Yearly maintenance costs are estimated at \$3 million. (These costs were defined by VHB at the Lower Road RUAC's January 25, 2023, presentation as rail, track, and signal system maintenance.)
[https://www.maine.gov/mdot/ofps/ruac/lowerroad/docs/Lower%20Road%20RUAC%20Mtg_230125-presentation.pdf]
- Bus service in the corridor between Bangor and Portland had a pre-pandemic annual ridership of 152,000 in 2019, with capacity for expanded service.
- Passenger service on this line ceased in 1960. In the 1980's, Guilford Transportation consolidated its freight operations to the Back Road through Lewiston/Auburn, discontinuing freight on the Lower Road. Guilford filed for abandonment of the Lower Road, but the state acquired the line before that process was completed. Since the state acquired the line, other than three short-line operators, no commercial carrier has expressed interest in the Lower Road for either freight or passengers.
- An Interim Trail on the Lower Road using the existing rail corridor is estimated to cost \$34.3 million for a stone-dust surface and \$43 million for a paved surface. Yearly maintenance costs are estimated at \$80,400-\$134,000 for paved surface and \$93,800- 147,400 for gravel/stone dust surface.
- A Rail-with-Trail on the Lower Road would be much more expensive and is estimated to cost \$146.3 million for a stone-dust surface and \$151.8 million for a paved surface and would have significant environmental impacts. Yearly maintenance cost estimates are the same as for the Interim Trail option.
- The Lower Road corridor contains three major rivers (the Androscoggin, Cathance, and Kennebec), seven perennial streams, and numerous wetlands. Using the existing rail corridor without the expansions necessary for a Rail-with-Trail configuration would have significantly less environmental impact.
- Maine DOT's most recent State Rail Plan does not recommend reinstating passenger or freight rail service on the Lower Road. Maine DOT's 2023 Active Transportation Plan designates the Lower Road as a high priority corridor for interim use as a bicycle and pedestrian trail.
- According to Maine DOT, Amtrak's fifteen-year plan has no provision for expanding passenger service through either the Lower Road or the Back Road.



165 Main Street
P.O. Box 62
Damariscotta, ME 04543
207-209-4129

EDA designated economic development district

- The Lower Road rail corridor affords spectacular views and opportunities to access waterways and would connect to Brunswick's existing river walk that is slated for expansion to Bath, other Maine trail systems and the East Coast Greenway, making it a scenic trail of state and national significance.
- 205 individuals provided public comments during the RUAC process. Approximately 81 percent favored any Interim Trail option; 3 percent specifically favored the Rail-with- Trail option; 11 percent favored rail use; 4 percent were neutral or asked questions.

The state has owned this corridor for more than 30 years, and the communities along it want to see this valuable but dormant asset utilized for the benefit of the people of this region and the state. The RUAC majority finds that there would be significant health, economic, environmental, and transportation benefits of an Interim Trail utilizing the Lower Road rail corridor, and therefore, recommends creation of an Interim Trail.