

Gay M. Grant
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March 4, 2025,

RE: Testimony 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."

To the Honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation:

My name is Gay Grant, from Gardiner. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of LD 29. I served in the 126th, 127th and 128th Legislatures and served on the Transportation Committee during the 128th. I currently serve as a city councilor in Gardiner. The city council has submitted its own letter in support of LD 29. I also represented the City of Gardiner on the Rail Use Advisory Council (RUAC), which studied the best uses of the unused rail corridor known as the "Lower Road." I have also lived adjacent to this corridor for more than 50 years.

With the unanimous support of the Gardiner City Council, I voted with the majority of the RUAC, 11 of 14 members, to recommend the "Trail Until Rail" option for the Lower Road, which is before you today. A 33.5-mile trail between Gardiner and Brunswick that connects through the Kennebec River Rail Trail all the way to Augusta, would provide considerable economic benefits to Gardiner and this entire region. The Gardiner City Council last month reiterated that support with the above-mentioned letter of support.

We have worked for years to make our city more "walkable," and to provide ways for our citizens to enjoy the natural beauty of our community and region. This proposal is consistent with all our economic development efforts and is part of our work to make Gardiner a great place to live, work and play.

I would ask you to please consider these key points from the RUAC study:

- Passenger service on this line ceased in 1960. The last through freight shipped on the Lower Road was in the 1980s, and since that time the rail infrastructure has only received the most basic maintenance.
- Restoration of passenger rail along the 33.5-mile Lower Road is estimated to cost \$363 million.
- A stone-dust surface Interim Trail on the Lower Road utilizing the existing rail corridor is estimated to cost \$34.3 million (\$43 million for paved surface). A paved surface, such as the Kennebec River Rail Trail, would allow for easier use by wheelchair, walker, and stroller users.

- In Maine DOTs April 11, 2023, testimony to this committee when presenting the Bangor Propensity Study, the department concluded that, given the relatively low demand, low population density, and other considerations, extending passenger service between Portland and Bangor along the Lower Road was not economically feasible.
- The department also told the committee in April 2023 that given the state's population and lack of highway congestion the state would be at competitive disadvantage to secure federal funds to restore passenger rail along this corridor.
- 205 individuals provided public comments, including Gardiner citizens and members of our business community, during the RUAC process. Approximately 81 percent favored any Interim Trail option; 3 percent specifically favored the Rail-with-Trail option; and 11 percent favored rail use.

From talking with people in my community, and reviewing the data, listening to experts and public testimony, I'm convinced a trail is the most cost-effective, environmentally, and economically compelling use of this valuable but unused transportation corridor. Such a trail would provide the most benefits to the most citizens for the least cost of any proposed use.

From my work in the legislature and now on the city council, I know that there is growing demand for expanded bus service, especially for our elderly citizens and folks who struggle to maintain a working private vehicle. Expanded bus service would better fit the motorized transportation needs of the citizens here, rather than much more expensive passenger rail that is limited by the location of the tracks. A bus system would have to be developed before a rail corridor could be developed. Passengers must get from the station to wherever they are going, otherwise, a train is of little use.

The members of the RUAC were invited to ride in MDOT's maintenance vehicles so we could see the Lower Road for ourselves. This corridor boasts amazing views and access to the Kennebec, Androscoggin and Cathance rivers. Connecting the communities along this corridor through a trail that would connect to state and national trails would have a measurable positive economic impact for my city, our region, and the state.

To allow this asset to sit unused for decades is a waste. Now is the time to capitalize on growing public support and federal funds for green and healthy transportation infrastructure and to reimagine this historic corridor for a new future.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I hope you enjoy the customary 'tribute' from a former committee member.