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Senator, District 18

THE MAINE SENATE  
132nd Legislature

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**Joint Standing Committee on Transportation on  
LD 676, An Act to Fund the Recommendations of the Mountain Division  
Rail Use Advisory Council  
April 4, 2025**

Senator Nangle, Representative Crafts, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation: I am Senator Rick Bennett of Oxford; and I have the honor of serving 14 communities in Western Maine in the State Senate. I am here to present LD 676, "An Act to Fund the Recommendations of the Mountain Division Rail Use Advisory Council."

In June of 2021, the 130<sup>th</sup> Legislature enacted LD 672, which was signed into law as *Resolve, Chapter 52*. This resolve directed the Department of Transportation to review the Mountain Division Line rail corridor for potential nonrail uses through a rail corridor use advisory council.

The 12-member Mountain Division Rail Use Advisory Council was formed in August of 2021 and had its first meeting the next month. The Advisory Council was made up of representatives from each town along the section of rail corridor under consideration (Standish, Baldwin, Hiram, Brownfield, and Fryeburg), representatives from state agencies, regional planning organizations, the Portland Water District, and trail and rail advocates.

In May of 2022, the Advisory Council voted **11-1** to recommend the interim conversion of 31 miles of the existing railroad track to an interim 10'-wide paved bicycle and pedestrian trail. It also recommended that snowmobiles remain an allowable use within the corridor, under annual agreement with MaineDOT. The Council did not support expanding allowable uses to include ATVs or other motorized recreational vehicles.

As a result of that report, last session the Legislature enacted LD 404, to direct the Department to implement the Advisory Council's recommendations. Over the past couple of years, MaineDOT has taken steps to implement these recommendations by contracting with HNTB to conduct a feasibility study and taking public comment on the study. But there is much more work to be done.

This bill would provide funding to implement the recommendations of the Mountain Rail Use Advisory Council. The way this bill is written it would provide a one-time \$500 federal expenditure allocation for the replacement of the tracks on the 31 miles of the rail corridor between the towns of Fryeburg and Standish. The \$500 is a placeholder amount until we know how much money can receive from federal Congressionally Directed Spending or other sources.

During each step of this process, railroad extremists have pushed back against the effort to make this project come to fruition. You will see testimony today in your folders or here in the room where they are continuing to try to scuttle this important project in western Maine that will provide a magnificent recreational use of what has been for the past 40 years a wasting state-owned asset. They are living in a dreamland. The U.S. is not going to be crisscrossed with high-speed rail anytime soon, and this line in particular has never been successful since its inception in the last 1800s. Indeed, this is why the State has come to own it. The Mountain Division past Westbrook has not been used for decades, and there are no opportunities in the near future for it to be used again without vast rebuilding of the rail. The owner of the Conway Scenic Railway came to the Rail Use Advisory Council with a so-called plan to use it. The essence of the proposal was the State of Maine ask our congressional delegation, particularly Senator Collins to find hundreds of millions of dollars to rebuild the line, so that he could take tourists from Portland to North Conway to spend their money. It is a pipedream. Further pondering of such ideas is limiting the immediate opportunity to build a valuable new asset that will provide safe, secure, enjoyable recreation for Maine people and tourist dollars for our region.

The Mountain Division runs through some magnificent parts of Maine's landscape: the Brownfield Bog, numerous lakes and ponds, including Sebago, the Saco River, Mount Cutler, the amazing hills of Brownfield, Baldwin and Fryeburg. Failing to follow through on the decision of the last Legislature, supported by the RUAC and the MaineDOT would be a travesty.

This is a very exciting project and I encourage your support. Thank you for your consideration and I would be happy to answer any questions.