

Transportation Committee Hearing: LD 956 Testimony - Public Hearing 4/4/25

Senator Nangle, Representative Crafts, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation

My name is Jenny Ward, and I reside in Greenville, Maine. I serve as the Interim Director of the Maine Trails Coalition (MTC), a grassroots organization founded in 2019 following a statewide gathering in October 2018, where public interest in connecting communities through trails was overwhelmingly evident. Since then, MTC has grown into a statewide voice for trails, fostering diverse collaborations to champion the establishment, use, and stewardship of Maine's trail networks.

I am here today to express MTC's strong support for LD 956, which represents a critical opportunity to enhance Maine's active transportation and recreational trail infrastructure. By repurposing this critical segment of long-unused rail corridor from Ayers Junction into Calais, the legislation would continue the successful effort to connect communities, expand recreational opportunities for residents and visitors alike, and create multi-use pathways that serve a broad range of needs. This dormant rail corridor is an underutilized asset with immense potential to provide immediate and lasting benefits to Maine's transportation and recreation network while preserving options for future rail use.

Similar work is already underway in the southern part of the state, and broadening this initiative to extend the Down East Sunrise Trail in eastern Maine would provide comparable benefits to a region poised for growth and increased connectivity. Investing in active transportation infrastructure and recreation is no longer just a desirable enhancement—it is an essential and urgent priority in the face of our changing landscape. A recent study commissioned by the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development found that access to outdoor recreation amenities was the #1 reason why people chose to move to Maine.

The Down East Sunrise Trail, and this proposed expansion along the Calais Branch rail corridor, are part of Maine's Active Transportation Arterials Plan. The plan is a vision for a robust and connected active transportation network that encompasses several existing and proposed trails including the Eastern Trail, Mountain Division Trail, Casco Bay Trail, Merrymeeting Trail, and the East Coast Greenway. These trails, in place and planned, will eventually connect 25 of Maine's largest cities and towns, with a combined population of 743,000 residents, while an additional 175,000 Mainers live within five miles of the proposed network. Providing a pathway for continued trail networking in Eastern Maine from the successful Sunrise Trail (I have participated in the annual Down East Sunrise Trail Relay) is another piece of this important effort.

The benefits of this investment are significant. Multi-use trails transform communities by providing safe commuting alternatives, enhancing tourism, promoting outdoor recreation, and fostering environmental stewardship. Maine's globally recognized outdoor reputation positions us to leverage these assets into a critical and thriving pillar of the state's recreation economy which contributes over \$3B to Maine's GDP.

MTC strongly supports LD 956 as a strategic, forward-thinking investment in Maine's transportation and recreation future. I urge the committee to advance this legislation by voting **ought to pass** and seizing this opportunity to enhance connectivity, sustainability, and economic vitality across our state. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Jenny Ward
Interim Director, Maine Trails Coalition