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For my testimony I submitted this published letter, I wrote a few month ago. I hope you can read and learn from my experience:

In "down eastern" Maine, towns lie dormant, economies are stymied, and jobs lost. The population grapples with the dichotomy of economic desertification and serious health issues. Washington and Hancock Counties, populous is one of the most unhealthy in Maine, stemming from impoverishment. Why and how did this happen? It goes back to many decisions of both the state and local governments, and private industry, along with one of the worst transportation decisions in our states history.

When the most vital backbone of the region collapsed, so did everything else. The railroad traversed the region; from Ellsworth/Bangor to Eastport. Connecting, all the critical villages in-between including: Unionville, Cherryfield, Harrington, Columbia Falls, Whitneyville Machias and East Machias.

A chicken and egg issue, the railroad collapsing alongside small manufacturers, businesses and seaports. It happened all together. The state in its desperation to save this vital resource purchased the rail line with state funds to the tune of millions.

Instead of pursuing the revitalization of the economy with restoration of this Rail "life line", locals lobbied for a "multi use" trail on the rail line.

In a horrible scene, rails and ties were ripped up and sold for scrap.

Today it is a horrifying mess: an eroded RR bed ripped apart by "All Terrain Vehicles" (ATV's). The "trail" has sections of sand and dust that permeate your lungs, wildlife that is scarred off by the noise of gasoline driven ATV's. A population that recreates with gasoline and not their legs has become morbidly obese, hypertensive, diabetic. Illnesses caused by the lack of exercise and opportunity. By embracing gasoline-powered recreation, we all suffer. The state now has one of the world's most expensive ATV trails, promoting pollution, and unhealthy recreation. I rode the entire length of this so-called "Sunshine trail" on my bicycle a month ago. Surprisingly I only saw a handful of other bikes, while being surrounded by hundreds of ATV's.

The aforementioned example is a choice that is happening across the state. Right now that state is considering ripping up 2 other railroads: in Southern Maine between Yarmouth and Portland, and in Central Maine between Brunswick and Augusta. This choice is stark and has significant implications for our future. Trail groups are converging with almost no one, highlighting the disastrous choice it is.

Railroads are hard to build. They are almost completely level and go through some of the most expensive property in the state. In todays terms they would be almost impossible to build because of the cost of property and rights of way being lost. A railroad can revamp and entire regions economy, as can be seen throughout the world. China's belt and road initiative purports to bring rail service to many part of South-East Asia. It will transform economies.

Railway rebuilds and economic revitalizations can be done in Maine. Rail can transport orders of magnitude more goods and people than roadways can. Doing it for freight (3-4 times cheaper) and 10 fold cheaper for passengers.

Rail can bring orders of magnitude more economic activity, increased land values and revived downtowns. Bike and ATV trails will never come close to doing this. We have an opportunity to convert these critical "trees" of transportation to be electrified. A decarbonized propulsion, in which the power comes from within our state. Clean solar, wind and hydropower can be used for true pollution free, "made in Maine", transportation energy.

Former governor Baldacci spent millions of dollars planning this future. Not million dollar bike paths. Yet current administrations and regional planning organizations, are promoting the destruction of our last vital railway corridors, so they can taugt another "cool bike trail" and make themselves look like local hero's, while the larger picture of transportation costs, congestions, pollution and a clean energy future are ignored. Turning these lifelines of

transportation into bike paths is like buying a grand piano and using it as a coffee table in your living room.

Trails folks will tell you that they want rail and trail, but the reality of it is that most rights of way are too narrow to allow passing tracks (critical for passenger rail) and these lines were designed for railroads. Would you want to walk next to an 89 MPH train with your baby carriage? In Western ME, the Mt Division RR is an example of how a "rail with trail" has destroyed the possibility of rail restoration, yet bike groups insist on stating that they will restore rail in the future. In the entire USA this has almost never happened. Once this right of way is lost, forever will be our economic opportunity and ability to decarbonize transportation.

We all want bike paths, let's put them where they belong: in roadways, with blocked off lanes or on the sides of roads. Not in railroad rights of way. We want a clean green future that can restore the Augusta downtown, not leave it as an expensive parking lot. We want electrified clean passenger rail between Maine largest cities, not more congestion and highways.

Electrified cars are part of the solution but need to be integrated into railway stations, not be the format to get you between cities. Adding thousands of more 4000 lbs. electric cars onto the already overcrowded highways is not a solution. We need to get folks away from all cars and get them using clean green rail. The bike path should not obfuscate that future and right now we are on a path that will do just that. We want a clean green future, not economically insignificant bike trails. Please Mainers, let's make the right choices, let's choose electrified rail and a prosperous future.

Paul Weiss, is a director on both: the Maine Rail Transit Coalition and the Maine Rail Group and does consulting on rail transportation and clean energy for several organizations.