

Richard A. Bennett
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3 State House Station
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THE MAINE SENATE
131st Legislature

Testimony of Senator Richard A. Bennett

Presenting LD 404, "Resolve, to Direct the Department of Transportation to Implement the Recommendations of the Mountain Division Rail Use Advisory Council"
May 18, 2023

Senator Chipman, Representative Williams, and esteemed members of the Transportation Committee: I am Senator Rick Bennett of Oxford, and I have the honor of serving 14 communities in Western Maine in the State Senate. On behalf of the Maine Department of Transportation, I am pleased to present LD 404, "Resolve, to Direct the Department of Transportation to Implement the Recommendations of the Mountain Division Rail Use Advisory Council."

In June of 2021, the 130th 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.

Last May, the Advisory Council released its recommendations (attached). The 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.

LD 404 directs the Department of Transportation to implement the Advisory Council's recommendations. Funding needed to implement these changes will be addressed in the companion bill, LD 1450, which I will be presenting today as well.

The rail has not been used for nearly 40 years and there are no apparent opportunities in the near future for it to be used again. As a result, the Mountain Division corridor is a public asset going to waste. The Mountain Division runs through some magnificent parts of Maine's landscape. The paved trail would provide an all-access trail for residents and visitors of all ages for walking, running, and biking. This paved trail would allow wheelchairs, strollers, and safe access to trails. Our local economy will benefit immensely from this investment. We have an incredible opportunity before us.

The Mountain Division runs through some magnificent parts of Maine's landscape – along the shores of Sebago Lake, through charming villages like Hiram and Brownfield, on causeways

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across sparkling ponds, along the meandering Saco River, and through the foothills and majestic mountains of western Maine. It connects so many other trail networks like those in Standish, parks in Gorham, and Mount Cutler in Hiram, as well as the Sebago to the Sea trail.

Currently there are two completed sections of paved trails now, running alongside the rail – five miles in Windham and Gorham and four miles in Fryeburg. As you will hear today and read in the testimony submitted, thousands of Maine people enjoy these two sections today – and they are anxious for more.

It is stunning that hundreds of people have taken the time to voice their support for moving this proposal forward two years ago for the study and now for the implementation. The groundswell of enthusiasm and passion for this proposal is like nothing I've seen before. I urge you to read the stories and hear the excitement being expressed. You are in a position with this proposal before you to bring much enjoyment to many and much prosperity to part of Maine that really needs it.

I want to be clear, if this resolve passes federal law would require that the line could be converted back to rail if such use is determined to be desirable in the future. But in the meantime this asset ought to bring recreation, health, connectedness, and economic benefits to the people of Maine.

Providing a continuous trail from Casco Bay through the mountains of western Maine will unlock tremendous opportunities for rural-urban connectedness, recreation and healthy living, property values and economic development.

I have submitted with my testimony letters from all of the municipalities along and near the rail corridor in support of this legislation.

Please note that there is a typo in the resolve that must be corrected. The word “in” in line 26 should be changed to “between”.

Thank you for your consideration and I would be happy to answer any questions.