

Testimony in support of LD 404

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Senator Chipman, Representative Williams, and Members of the Transportation Committee:

My name is Derek Strout and I am a resident of Portland and a staff member at Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. I am writing to testify in strong support of LD 404: *Resolve, to Direct the Department of Transportation to Implement the Recommendations of the Mountain Division Rail Use Advisory Council* and complete the conversion of the Mountain Division corridor to a regionally significant multi-use pathway.

As a family who prefers (and is fortunate to have the option of) getting around the area without our car, we agree with the Rail Use Advisory Council (RUAC) and communities along the route that the best use for the state-owned Mountain Division corridor is a wide, paved trail, accessible to people of all ages and abilities. As you know, this trail extension will fill in the gap between existing sections of the Mountain Division rail trail that already exist in Fryeburg and in Gorham and Windham. We agree with the council that it is time to bring this trail experience to Standish, Baldwin, Hiram, and Brownfield.

The Mountain Division Trail is a key piece of the state's recently released Maine State Active Transportation Plan, which states that "A robust AT system statewide will support the Maine Climate Action Plan and the Maine Economic Development Strategy 2020-2029 and enhance the vibrancy of Maine's cities, quintessential villages, and rural areas."

As a father of two young boys, safety is always a priority when we travel, especially when we are walking and biking. The Mountain Division corridor offers an exceedingly rare opportunity to connect communities with a safe and peaceful multi-use path that can and will be used for recreation as well as transportation. Whether it's for a flat place to walk and rehab a knee, a car-free route to Orchard Ridge Farm, or just to enjoy some peace and quiet in the woods, we love taking the southern section of the trail up to Sebago and are always disappointed that we can't continue further.

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy hopes that no rail corridors are ever lost. Yet if they do become inactive, we advocate the line is railbanked for future rail use. In the case of the Mountain Division corridor, the RUAC found that the 'trail until rail' option was deemed most appropriate by an 11-1 vote. If in the future, rail transit is deemed in the best interest of the surrounding communities, the corridor could be expanded to include rail, either passenger or freight, and the much greater additional costs of upgrading the rail infrastructure may be seen as an economically sound investment.

The many benefits of rail-trails, including in the areas of personal health, economic development, social equity, and environmental stewardship are well-documented. The return on investment has been proven time and time again on the country's 2,200 rail trails which stretch over 24,000 miles. The overarching benefit that rail-trails and similar multi-purpose trails provide is unique, owing to the fact that people will always need places to ride and walk safely, and these protected investments won't close for

lack of interest. These linear spaces are incredibly difficult to establish today, and the abandonment of railroad lines in the past will not happen again. Once given a new life, particularly with trail-oriented development including housing, locally owned bike shops, food and beverage establishments, B&Bs, and more, they reach their greatest potential.

While the benefits are many, there are responsibilities as well. Some have called rail-trails wide sidewalks or skinny parks. While both are true in a sense, they are certainly transportation and recreation spaces that require maintenance to ensure a safe and enjoyable user experience. While the formal rail-trail movement is not new and the costs of development are well established, the low cost of routine maintenance (activities performed at least once a year) is also becoming better documented. Fortunately, one of the most studied comparable rail-trails in length and landscape setting is nearby. The 59-mile Northern Rail-Trail in New Hampshire has found routine maintenance costs to range between only \$1,500-3,000/mile/year. This includes the value of volunteer labor.

Lastly, the Mountain Division Trail is a critical section of the half-completed 1,000-mile New England Rail-Trail Network vision <https://www.railstotrails.org/our-work/traination/newengland/>. Studies have shown that once a rail-trail is connected to other trails, its usage increases by 40-80%. With connections occurring north and south of Portland, this western link will only serve to increase the area's status as a regional commerce hub for sustainable tourism, while providing an everyday resource for residents like me and my family.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and I urge you to support the passage of LD 404.

Derek M. Strout
Portland