

To Members of the Transportation Committee:

My name is Ian McConnell, and I am writing in support of LD29. I am a proud resident of Bowdoinham as well as a primary care doctor in Brunswick at Maine Health.

As you assess the merits of LD29, I hope you will consider the important health and public safety benefits that would accompany the development of a 30+ mile recreational trail connecting several of the communities that I serve.

As a primary care doctor, I spend much of my day encouraging people to exercise. Decades of research has shown that regular walking reduces the risk of numerous chronic diseases including obesity, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and dementia, to name a few. More immediately, exercise can alleviate depression and anxiety and it also helps us sleep better.

Unfortunately, walking on the narrow shoulder of a sidewalk-less roadside—the predicament most Mainers find ourselves in—has become increasingly dangerous. Amidst the explosion of dangerous smart phone use while driving, pedestrian deaths have risen 60% nationally over the last 10 years. For the patient working toward a healthier life but reluctant like many to join a gym, where can I suggest they go?

This is the great opportunity of the interim Merrymeeting Trail recommended by the Rail Use Advisory Council. Being able to write a prescription for someone to get out on the Merrymeeting Trail and take in the breathtaking views as it traces the Androscoggin, Cathance, and Kennebec Rivers would be game changing for many of my patients. With 40% of Americans struggling with obesity and 11% with diabetes (per the CDC), the Merrymeeting Trail would be a public health asset paying dividends for generations to come. It would help us start to bend the curve on rising healthcare costs, as over 11% of U.S. healthcare expenditures are associated with inadequate physical activity (Carlson et al). This is not to mention the social benefits of spending time with others, outside in public spaces, as an important way to build connection and combat social isolation.

Based on my experience working with patients every day, I believe strongly that the interim trail recommended by the Rail Use Advisory Council would help us build healthier, happier, and more connected communities. Amidst a chronic disease epidemic, the time to invest in cost-effective infrastructure to support the health and safety of our communities is now. The possibility of utilizing the long unused Lower Road rail corridor as a recreational trail for walkers, runners, cyclists, skiers, horseback riders, snowmobilers, and ATV riders alike represents a golden opportunity to do this.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge all committee members to vote “Ought to Pass” on LD29, so that the interim trail can be made accessible to the communities I serve as soon as possible. Thank you for your time and consideration of this important matter and for all that you do in the legislature to support the health and safety of our communities.

Sincerely,

Ian McConnell, MD
Bowdoinham resident
Primary Care Physician - Maine Health