



Town of Bowdoinham

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Nicole Briand, Town Manager

February 10, 2025

State of Maine
Transportation Committee
132nd Maine Legislature
Augusta, ME

LD 29 – Lower Road Rail Use Advisory Council

Dear Members of the Legislature,

I am writing to express our strong support for LD 29, which seeks to advance the development of the Merrymeeting Trail. This 26-mile multi-use trail, connecting the Kennebec River Rail Trail in the north to the Androscoggin River Bicycle and Pedestrian Path in the south, promises to be a transformative project for Bowdoinham and the surrounding communities.

The state has owned this corridor for more than 30 years, and the communities along it want to see this valuable but dormant asset utilized for the benefit of the people of this region and the state. The majority of the Rail Use Advisory Council (RUAC) finds that there would be significant health, economic, environmental, and transportation benefits of an Interim Trail utilizing the Lower Road rail corridor.

Regional Economic Benefits: The economic benefits of the Merrymeeting Trail to our region are profound and far-reaching. By linking Augusta to Brunswick, and potentially extending to Bath, the trail will create an unprecedented "capital to coast" connection. Furthermore, the Merrymeeting Trail could serve as an alternate route on the East Coast Greenway, a 3,000-mile national trail linking Calais, Maine, with Key West, Florida. This would enhance our region's connectivity and attractiveness to long-distance travelers and tourists, further boosting our local economy.

Direct Economic Benefits: With 122,250 people living within 10 miles of this trail system, the potential for economic growth is immense. A comprehensive study of similar trail systems has shown that multi-use trails can generate significant revenue. It is estimated that the Merrymeeting Trail could bring in approximately \$5 million annually in direct spending from trail users. This includes spending on food, lodging, equipment, and other related services. The influx of tourists and visitors will directly benefit local businesses like our Farmers' Market, the gas station, Merryreading Books, Three Robber Pub, Cathance River Gallery, and the Merrymeeting Arts Center. As well as lodging facilities, like our vacation rentals and other restaurants, cafes, retail stores, and lodging in our neighboring communities leading to increased sales and business growth.

The location of the trail in the heart of our downtown at our waterfront parks will also expose visitors to the myriad of community events which serve as fundraisers and pop-up shops for our small businesses. These include July's Open Farm and Studio Day, which brings patrons to farms located all along the trail who partner with local artisans to sell their items. In August our Tour de Bowdoinham food pantry charity bike ride follows

the trail and its staging area is at our waterfront park where the track intersects our downtown. Further, Celebrate Bowdoinham our Town's annual birthday party in September is also hosted at our waterfront park. It is our flagship event where we host numerous activities for kids, artisan booths, and many fundraising activities that support our area non-profits, small businesses, charities, and the local community. Other annual events at the waterfront include our Summer Sunday Concert series which are paired with benefit dinner for our local non-profits. As well as our Holiday Festival and the Ice & Smelt Festival both emulating from our waterfront park into the greater village which also hosts artisan sales and other charity events. These will all greatly benefit from the additional exposure to those visiting the area.

The Merrymeeting Trail will also enhance our communities' connections to several major water bodies, including Merrymeeting Bay, a 20,000-acre tidal estuary with significant natural habitat. This area is popular with locals and tourists for activities such as rowing, kayaking, swimming, walking, bird watching, ice fishing, fishing, and duck hunting. The trail will provide greater access to these recreational opportunities, further boosting our local tourism industry.

Tax Revenue Impact: The projected increase in business activity along the trail corridor will significantly boost local tax revenue. Increased sales taxes from higher business revenues will provide a steady stream of additional income for Bowdoinham. This additional tax revenue can be reinvested in local infrastructure, public services, and community development projects, further enhancing the quality of life for residents.

Health, Environmental, and Transportation Benefits: The RUAC majority has identified significant health, economic, environmental, and transportation benefits of utilizing the Lower Road rail corridor for an Interim Trail. The trail will promote physical activity and outdoor recreation, contributing to the overall health and well-being of our residents. Environmentally, the trail will provide a sustainable transportation alternative, reducing carbon emissions and promoting cleaner air. From a transportation perspective, the trail will offer a safe and efficient route for cyclists and pedestrians, easing traffic congestion and improving connectivity between communities.

Community and Connectedness: The Merrymeeting Trail will foster a strong sense of community and connectedness among residents. By linking village areas in Bowdoinham, Richmond, and Gardiner with larger towns like Topsham and Augusta, the trail will create a network of connected communities. This enhanced connectivity will encourage social interaction, community events, and shared experiences among residents, strengthening our communal bonds.

Benefits for Users of All Ages: The Merrymeeting Trail will cater to users of all ages, providing a safe and accessible space for outdoor activities. Children and families will enjoy the opportunity to explore nature, while seniors will benefit from a safe, level pathway for walking and socializing. The trail will offer something for everyone, from cycling enthusiasts and joggers to casual walkers and nature lovers. With the potential for other uses where double track is available.

For over a decade, towns and volunteers along the route have worked tirelessly to make this vision of connected communities a reality. We believe that the Merrymeeting Trail will significantly strengthen and improve our communities. It will serve as a catalyst for economic development, bringing prosperity and vitality to our historic downtown villages. We urge you to support LD 29 and help make this transformative project a reality.

Sincerely,

Yvette Meunier
Director of Planning and Development
Town of Bowdoinham