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South Portland, Maine
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Testimony in Favor of L.D. 956 “Resolve, Directing the Department of Transportation to Implement the Recommendation of the Calais Branch Rail Use Advisory Council to Create a Multi-use Trail”

Senator Nangle, Representative Crafts, and distinguished members of the Transportation Committee,

I am writing in favor of L.D. 956, which will permit the conversion of 12 miles of unused rail extending from Calais to Pembroke into a recreational path known as the Calais Branch Rail Corridor, henceforth referred to as the Calais Branch.

The Calais Branch is necessary because it will:

- 1. Extend the Down East Sunrise Trail from Ayers Junction to Calais:** The Down East Sunrise Trail is an 87-mile multi-use trail connecting Ellsworth to Ayers Junction. Last Fall, two friends and I rode our bicycles from Calais to Portland. The Down East Sunrise Trail was one of the best parts of our nearly 300-mile trip because it provided a respite from rural roads that have small or no shoulder where traffic travels at high speeds (a lethal combination for vulnerable road users¹). This security coupled with the beauty of wetlands, forests, and animal sightings provided an unforgettable experience and deepened our love for Maine. Extending the path from Ayers Junction to Calais is a much-needed infrastructure development that will increase trail user safety and security by reducing time spent on rural roads and increase accessibility to the trail directly from towns the Calais Branch extends through.
- 2. Improve Health:** Increasing access to recreational trails is associated with greater frequency and duration of physical activity, especially among those who are currently inactive. ^{2,3} Physical activity is one of the most powerful interventions for addressing overweight, obesity, and other chronic diseases affecting our population. The prevalence of obesity is greater in Washington County, where nearly 4 in 10 adults are obese, compared to the state level where nearly 3 in 10 adults are obese. ^{4,5} Access to trails also improves a variety of mental health outcomes due to exposure to nature. ^{6,7} Estimates suggest for every \$1 spent on trails, nearly \$3 is saved in healthcare spending stemming from the net positive effect of recreational trails on physical and mental health. ⁸ Over 4,000 individuals living in towns the

Calais Branch extends through, including Calais, Baring Plantation, Charlotte, and Pembroke stand to benefit from this public health intervention.⁹

3. **Benefit the Local Economy:** The Calais Branch will also connect Calais, Baring Plantation, Charlotte, and Pembroke to the East Coast Greenway, a 3000-mile pedestrian and bike route. This which will spur the regional economy, with demand for lodging, dining, and other services generating an estimated \$983k to \$1.4M per year from local and out of state tourism.¹⁰

In summary, L.D. 956 will improve community connectivity by extending the Down East Sunrise Trail from Ellsworth through 4 additional towns to Calais. Permitting the interim development of the Calais Branch may also increase physical activity, mental health, and reduce healthcare costs while stimulating the local economy through tourism.

References

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- ⁹ Calais branch rail corridor study: Calais to ayers junction maine. Maine Department of Transportation. From: <https://uploads.mainedotpima.com/2805a0dc-9052-4c02-a4fc-41d6c3b517be.pdf>. Accessed Aril 1, 2025.
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