



Meeting Notes

Meeting Date: November 15, 2022

Notes Prepared By: Phil Goff, Project Manager

Place: Cumberland Town Hall

Date: 11/17/2022

Project No.: WIN: 25979.00 / VHB: 55607.00

Project Name: MaineDOT RUAC Supporting Study – SLA Berlin Subdivision

RUAC Meeting Attendees (bold indicates attendance):

MaineDOT Team	RUAC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nate Howard, (MaineDOT, PM) • Nate Moulton, (MaineDOT Dir. of Freight and Passenger Services) • Phil Goff (VHB) • Tim Bryant (VHB) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chair Bill Shane (Cumberland Town Manager) • Doug Beck (ME Bureau of P&L, RTC Manager) • Brian Harris (ME Yacht) • Jason Birkel (General Manager, St. Lawrence & Atlantic Railroad) • Chris Chop (GPCOG Transportation Director) • Christine Landes (New Gloucester Town Manager) • Diane Barnes (North Yarmouth Town Manager) • Dick Woodbury (CBTA) • Hope Cahan (Falmouth Town Councilor) • Jeremiah Bartlett (Portland Transportation Engineer) • Jonathan LaBonte (Transportation Analyst, Auburn Town Manager) • Scott LaFlamme (Yarmouth Economic Development Director) • Tony Donovan (Maine Rail Transit Coalition/MRTC) • Angela King (BCM Advocacy Director) • Nate Wildes (Exec. Director, Live and Work in Maine) • Natalie Thomsen (New Gloucester Town Planner)

Agenda:

- > Introductions
- > Council Work Session
 - o Where are you right now and what additional information would be helpful?
 - o Initial thoughts on Majority and minority recommendations
- > Next Steps (2:00 pm)
 - o Draft Feasibility Study report (est. November 28)
 - o Dec 5th public meeting logistics
 - o Dec 22nd Council meeting – Reschedule?



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- › Public Comment
- › Link to Virtually Attend:
- › <https://youtu.be/Hi8Ai4vMmzQ>

Meeting Summary and Council Discussion:

Question 1: Where are you right now and what additional information would be helpful?

- › Jeremiah: still has concerns about the future transportation framework within the context, and concerns about equity and the need to hear more voices in the process.
- › Jonathan: the statute we are working under was driven by trail advocates which is OK, but there are still many questions about the future of the I-295 corridor. Perhaps the Council makes a rec to study some of the elements in more detail that are beyond the scope of this study?
- › Dick: for every committee that has looked at this issue, none of the entities have asked for freight as a service. Other groups looking at passenger rail have concluded that the population densities are not high enough for fed funding. Even if the \$\$ comes thru, then we have the issue of which corridor should we use? The CSX corridor is the most reasonable and switching back and forth at Yarmouth Junction is not logical.
- › Angela: given the info we have received, moving forward with Trail Until Rail (TUR) option is the most logical. It is still not clear for me what freight rail is being utilized on the corridor.
- › Tony: (written comments to be submitted and distributed to the Council)
- › Hope: what I have heard from folks in Falmouth is strong support for TUR. If we can get passenger rail at some point, that is great (as long as it is electric not diesel). This is our Town's only realistic opportunity for a major trail project. Passenger rail is a long-term and expensive proposition, and we can always do that in the long term if needed.
- › Jason: the main thing I want to say is that we haven't formally abandoned our rights to freight service.
- › Nate Wildes: I was unfamiliar with both the process and the corridor and I've checked in with 26 of my business members. One highlight for Maine is the quality of life and taking advantage of assets (for which the corridor is underutilized). My members want to see action not inaction and there is a clear, organized and actionable community ready to implement a trail. Let's also keep in mind that we can do other things later related to rail.
- › Chris: good arguments on both sides but I am leaning towards a TUR alternative. There has been significant community support and several of the trail segments are prioritized for trail usage. The capital cost for the trail is \$50-55m and \$100k/year in operations vs a passenger rail service would be \$200m or more with high level operations costs.



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- › Bill: Additional information that would be helpful. In Cumberland, we normally would meet with abutters along the route and during the Hi-rail trip, I was struck with how close some of the residences are to the corridor. I feel we need to connect better to abutters, who haven't had a good voice at the table.
- › Brian: reminder to the Council that we use the track hauling boats ½ mile to storage per a lease with the state. We don't take a stand on the trail configuration further north but we want to maintain rail use at the lower section of rail corridor. Can we recommend additional study to determine the cost-benefit of the \$50m cost for the trail?
 - Nate H: the Legislation is open-ended and the Council is able to ask for that if desired.
- › Natalie: there hasn't really been much input from residents so I don't feel comfortable speaking on behalf of the Town.
- › Scott: there is lots of support for the trail in town. I don't think the estimates in the 2018 economic impact study are very credible. I think in this case, we can have both a trail but also have commuter rail on the other corridor.
- › Diane: there was overwhelming support for TUR for this underutilized asset. We shouldn't do nothing until we are ready for rail. We can do that later. I also agree with Bill that we need to bring abutter voices to the table which have been missing so far.
- › Jeremiah: I am still a bit frustrated with the process, as I don't think it takes the full context into account. Per the climate crisis, we need to act now. I am skeptical that if it is a trail, that it will ever become rail if desired. I think Portland would benefit with a dual use facility and rail with trail (RWT) would be ideal. We have spent a huge amount of \$\$ on I-395 and we are thinking of lots of \$\$ to expand a highway to Gorham. In other words, the state has the money, we just need to have the will to spend it wisely.
- › Jonathan: we would need to widen I-295 for BRT and that isn't going to happen. We still don't know if CSX will allow commuter rail and if sidings can be included and we really need to know that to make a decision. There was a commitment during Baldacci Administration to build a wye in Yarmouth. We need to see a draft of the state's rail plan and/or the transit plan to understand the larger context. On the freight side, it is unlikely that CSX will want to have service to the Port of Portland, and perhaps further to Montreal. This is a short line between Portland and Auburn which doesn't help them. Missing in our deliberations is the cost of the trail converted to rail in the future. Conversion from trail to freight rail and the costs involved could be good to know. We only know what TUR cost is and we should look more closely at RWT.
- › Dick: the Downeaster line is currently shared along the CSX line and it is being shared well. This creates a strong precedent for freight service to share with passenger. Making this corridor a trail is a long-term plan for active transportation plan (per the AT Arterials plan).



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- › Tony: climate change is a critical issue. This should not be considered "TUR", it is really about building a trail for the advocates. The term used is "interim trail use" but it is a misnomer...it is never going back to rail. MaineDOT should instead look at the context of benefit-costs for trail and/or rail. The future is a hybrid electric train service that deals with the 50,000 cars that come into Portland. The most upsetting thing are those who say we can't do this...we can!
- › Hope: if we don't have the state's support, this won't happen. I agree that climate change is critical. We are saying let's go with improved passenger rail that is already there. The latest research says that we may have 10' sea level rise...will that impact one or both of the corridors? From a climate POV, it is best to have both rail on one line and "active transit" on the other line.
- › Jason: has anyone talked to CSX about adding passenger rail to their current service. What do they think?
- › Nate W: my opinion on the opinions is that people have strong feelings, and ultimately, that is what our recommendation is...just strong feelings. The output here is satisfactory as I think we have gotten the information from MaineDOT to make an informed opinion. It is our job to articulate what our constituents want, not just our personal opinions.
- › Jonathan: How do trail advocates think about TUR vs. RWT as an outcome?
- › Chris: I think this has been a fair and open process and thank MaineDOT, VHB and the chair for guiding the process. This is an important and underutilized asset. We need to consider the financial feasibility of the full effort. Besides climate change, we need to focus on public health and outdoor rec has exploded.
- › Bill: I'm definitely interested in the RWT option but I do think that it will be complicated and expensive with bridges and pinch points. In Europe they get things right with transportation options, not just highways...they put cars, buses, trains, and bikes along the same corridor. My constituency is interested in recreation uses but I do think there is some missed opportunity.
- › Brian: I recall the SLR service with baked beans being delivered to the B&M plant. I see it as an underutilized asset and think it would be great to have a path to get walkers and bikes to the waterfront. In Belfast, the Front Street Shipyard is on a wonderful walking trail (RWT) that is right on the river.
- › Scott: we need to address climate for sure though I don't think there is a silver bullet since both trains and trail use would be beneficial. We need more bus service too. Re: Jonathan's question about RWT....from Yarmouth's POV, we are concerned about lack of space for both rail AND trail. Also, there are safety concerns at Main Street.
- › Diane: the glaring issue for me is that we have the underutilized asset that we should use. Currently, there are restrictions that don't allow for permanent rail use. The Sunrise Trail has helped with economic dev in the Downeast area. To me, the RWT option isn't really feasible.
- › Jeremiah: it is a good question to ask to have both rail and trail (RWT). Portland has tried to create bike links to the north and MaineDOT has thwarted us at every turn.



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- › Jonathan: what is the cost for passenger rail vs TUR vs RWT and can we simply add the RWT cost to the passenger rail cost to understand the grand total? (Tim responded with VHB's cost estimates and clarified that yes, the RWT cost can be added to the passenger rail cost.)
- › Tony: there is a way to have RWT but it requires a federal development process. Often you can't do both along the same corridor. The train station site can support the trail.
- › Tony: Nate M says we have to go thru NEPA analysis which is incorrect. This study is flawed because we haven't ID'd the station sites.
- › Nate M: given that each of the costs are order-of-magnitude planning-level estimates, the RWT and passenger rail costs can be added to estimate the overall cost of doing both.
- › Hope: do we have a time estimate related to construction of a trail with rail service?
 - Nate M: there are so many unknowns that it is hard to know.
 - Tony: the Downeaster expansion from Portland to Brunswick was 3 years
 - Jonathan: within a decade is my estimate
- › Dick: there is no need for RWT because we have two corridors

Next Steps

- › Nate H: public meeting on Monday 12/5 at Greeley Center, 6-8 pm.
- › Nate H: Dec 22 RUAC meeting...will people be here? (consensus is 'yes')
 - Dick: would we need to meet after that? (Bill: not sure)

Public comments

- › Patty Barber, I live in Hiram near Fryeburg. I wish I could take a trail service to get here but the Mountain Division RUAC recommended a trail, so I am forced to drive. Nate M said we don't need to reach consensus. The Mtn Division public meeting included many trail supporters but they didn't say whether they like RWT or TUR. Big difference between the two. The terms are clever and the RWT should include a combo of costs. The RUAC process is wrong. When you read or listen to comments about support for a "trail", don't assume that they don't want RWT configuration.
- › Ed Suslovic, former Portland Mayor and on Metro board: we keep talking about climate change and we need to get people out of their cars. Metro Breeze buses carry far more people than the Downeaster. Don't be swayed by the romance of the rails; instead support more bus service. People who use trails are not just the elites as someone mentioned. Trails are used for transportation, not just recreation.



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- › Richard Rudolph: I am on the Lower Road RUAC. I took a train from Northampton MA to New Haven and Northampton has only 30,000 population so I think it can work here. The less well-off people in Auburn would be willing to take rail service to Portland. People can't afford electric cars and more funding allows people to pour more concrete and for DOT to build more. Use it for trains instead.
- › Carl Wilcox: I agree with Jeremiah Bartlett that there are lower income people who could use the train. Houses in Intervale have increased 531%. Others have an assessed value of <\$40,000. It is about the last mile connections. CSX line goes through Western Portland and there is nothing in the area so it is not a great option for passenger rail compared with the Berlin Subdivision line.