

Portland to Auburn Rail Use Advisory Council

Summary and Recommendations

Executive Summary

After a 9-month review of potential rail and non-rail uses for the state-owned Berlin Subdivision rail corridor from Portland to the Auburn/New Gloucester town line, seven of fifteen (7 of 15) members of the Portland to Auburn Rail Use Advisory Council (RUAC) voted to recommend the conversion of 26.5 miles of existing railroad track to an interim bicycle and pedestrian trail. Additionally, five (5) members of the RUAC voted to recommend the Trail with Rail option (i.e., leaving the track in place and building bicycle and pedestrian trail at an offset) and one (1) member voted for the Rail Use-only option. All the recommendations are included in this report. Two (2) members of the Council abstained.

Background

In June of 2021, two bills were signed into law that established a new process for reviewing a non-rail recreational or nonrecreational transportation use along state-owned rail corridors. [Public Law 21, Chapter 239](#) gave the Maine Department of Transportation (MaineDOT) Commissioner the authority to establish a Rail Use Advisory Council, upon the petition of one or more governmental entities. The purpose of these councils is to facilitate discussion, gather information, and provide advice to the commissioner regarding the future use of a rail corridor identified in the petition. These recommendations will include the benefits and costs of potential uses of the rail corridor, including rail and trail use, with the understanding that any non-rail use of the corridor is considered interim in nature

MaineDOT received letters of support from all communities along the rail corridor requesting the formation of a Rail Corridor Council and that the future use of the 26.5 miles of state-owned, inactive rail-line be studied and reviewed. The initial meeting of the RUAC occurred in April 2022. The process was concluded in January 2023.

The 15-member RUAC was composed of a single representative from each town along the section of rail corridor under consideration: Portland, Falmouth, Cumberland, Yarmouth, North Yarmouth, Pownal, New Gloucester and Auburn. In addition, members included representatives from Bicycle Coalition of Maine, Casco Bay Trail Alliance, Genesee & Wyoming, Greater Portland Council of Governments (GPCOG), Live + Work in Maine, Maine Rail Transit Coalition, and Maine Yacht Center:

Table 1. Portland to Auburn Rail Use Advisory Council Members

Nate Wildes, Executive Director, Live + Work in Maine	Scott Laflamme, Director of Economic Development, Yarmouth
Brian Harris, General Manager, Maine Yacht Center	Jeremiah Bartlett, Transportation Systems Engineer, Portland
Charles Hunter, AVP Government Affairs, G&W RR Services, Inc.	Natalie Thomsen, Town Planner, New Gloucester
Tony Donovan, Maine Rail Transit Coalition	Jonathan P. LaBonté, Transportation Systems Analyst, Auburn
Dick Woodbury, Casco Bay Trail Alliance	Diane Barnes, Town Manager, North Yarmouth
Angela King, Advocacy Manager, Bicycle Coalition of Maine	Becky Taylor-Chase, Town Administrator, Pownal
Bill Shane, Town Manager, Cumberland	Christopher Chop, Transportation Director, Greater Portland Council of Governments (GPCOG)
Hope Cahan, Town Councilor, Falmouth	

The following MaineDOT Staff provided technical support and administration for the Council:

- Nate Moulton, Director, Office of Freight and Passenger Services
- Nathan Howard, Director, Rail Program

I. Location

The portion of the Berlin Subdivision located within the State of Maine is slightly more than 85 miles long, of which approximately 26.5 miles between Auburn/New Gloucester town line and Portland is situated on right-of-way owned by the State of Maine and is the subject of this RUAC Study. The State-owned portion of the Berlin Subdivision was previously owned and operated by St. Lawrence and Atlantic Railroad (SLR) and is currently out of service. The subject corridor is rendered inaccessible through the installation of a barricade and removal of



Berlin Subdivision Rail Corridor Study area

a short section of rail, demarking the northernmost point of State ownership and preventing trains from entering the State-owned ROW.

The State-owned corridor starts at Ocean Gateway in Portland and runs just past the Auburn/New Gloucester town line, passing through Portland's East Deering neighborhood, Falmouth, Cumberland, Yarmouth, North Yarmouth, Pownal and New Gloucester. The section corresponds to railroad mile point 0.0 to 26.5.

The rail swing bridge at Back Cove in Portland (MP 1.4 - 1.7) is damaged beyond repair and a portion of the trestle has been removed.

II. Existing and Recent Uses of the Berlin Subdivision

The Maine Narrow Gauge Railroad Co. & Museum provides seasonal tourist excursions along a short portion of corridor from Ocean Gateway to a point south of the swing bridge along the Eastern Promenade. The Eastern Promenade Trail is located adjacent the rail along this same corridor.

In 2007 and 2010, MaineDOT acquired portions of the railroad line from SLR. In late 2015, SLR stopped providing service to B&M Baked Beans factory at Mile Post 1.7 in Portland, the only customer south of Auburn at the time. The SLR freight service between Auburn and Portland was placed in a status of discontinuance and has remained out of service to this day. However, SLR retains freight operating rights along the corridor.

III. Rail Use Advisory Council Process

The RUAC met 8 times from April 2022 to January 2023. The Council was Chaired by Bill Shane, Town Manager of Cumberland. MaineDOT staff provided technical support and administration. The civil and transportation engineering firm, VHB, provided engineering services and prepared the Feasibility study report (Section III).

The Council reviewed the approximately 26.5-mile-long section of the Berlin Subdivision from Portland to the Auburn/New Gloucester line for potential rail and non-rail uses. At these meetings, VHB presented the feasibility study for future rail, rail with trail, interim trail use options and an assessment of economic benefits prepared by RKG Associates. The Council also heard presentations on various rail and trail related topics from guest speakers, Council members and MaineDOT staff.

Over the course of nine months the Council considered three primary uses of the railroad corridor:

- 1. Rail Use.** This alternative provides for possible restoration of rail service in the future with potential rehabilitation of the existing railroad infrastructure to support reestablishment of rail operations. Operations may include:
 - Continuation of MaineDOT's current patrol and maintenance activities along the existing track corridor to ensure the existing rails remains intact and viable for possible

reestablishment of rail service in the future as required by the [State Rail Preservation Act](#).

- Reestablishment of freight rail service, including performance of State of Good Repair and Deferred Maintenance projects, targeted to accommodate delivery of materials and goods to commercial and industrial customers.
- Implementation of a passenger rail service, including capital infrastructure improvements needed to attain higher operating speeds and support a level and frequency of service that would meet ridership demands

- 2. Interim Trail until Rail (TUR)** (multi-use trail using the existing rail bed). This alternative includes removal of the existing tracks and ties and developing a multi-use trail on the former track bed. The trail surface may be gravel/stone dust or paved. The corridor will require minor modifications to support trail user loads and provide a uniform surface appropriate for the trail as well as a railing system where needed to safely accommodate bicyclists and pedestrians.

The conversion of the state-owned railroad to a trail is considered an interim non-rail use under the Rail Preservation Act requiring legislative approval.

- 3. Rail with Trail (RWT)** (multi-use trail adjacent to the existing rail bed). This alternative maintains the existing tracks and ties in current condition and establishes an adjacent and parallel multi-use trail with either a gravel/stone dust or paved surface. Grade differences in certain areas of the corridor will require retaining walls to support a new trail. Since this option assumes the rail will be in service, or someday return to service, the near edge of the trail (not including shoulder) shall be a minimum of 15 feet from the nearest rail, in accordance with MaineDOT standards for development of a RWT. However, this setback may be reduced to 10.5 feet, with MaineDOT approval, if a fence meeting MaineDOT standards is installed at the edge of the trail shoulder between the trail and the closest rail. A Rail with Trail configuration adjacent to passenger trains—typically moving much faster than freight trains—can be an uncomfortable experience for trail users when a minimum of 15 feet is not provided.

Rail with trail currently exists along the corridor from Ocean Gateway to a point south of the swing bridge along the Eastern Promenade.

Public engagement was an important part of the Berlin Subdivision Rail Corridor Study process. Comments were solicited in a variety of channels between April 2022 and January 2023, including five virtual RUAC meetings, three in-person RUAC meetings, one public meeting and through email comments, via direct email to MaineDOT and submissions through the MaineDOT website contact form. The public comments were reviewed, and specific opinions regarding the project were tabulated.

Over 700 public comments were received in an eight-month period from May 2022 through December 14, 2022. Approximately 86% of the public comments received indicated support for a trail. This included comments specifying desire for “trail until rail” and/or support for the development of the

relevant segment of the Casco Bay Trail Loop. A detailed assessment of the public comments can be found in Chapter 5 of *Berlin Subdivision Rail Corridor Study*.

IV. Summary of Berlin Subdivision Rail Corridor Study (Study)

Cost Estimates

Potential uses for the corridor and their associated cost estimates were developed based on the type of proposed rail service (passenger or freight) and trail surface (paved or gravel/stone dust). The Study also provided cost estimates for the “status quo” scenario – Alternative 0 maintain and preserve existing rail corridor. The costs range from \$0 in additional capital expenditure for maintaining/preserving the existing corridor to \$274 million for restoration of passenger rail service.

A conceptual cost estimate summary of each option for use of the corridor is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Conceptual Cost Estimate Summary

Alternative	Segment	Cost Estimate
0: Maintain/Preserve Existing Corridor		
Narrow Gauge RR Operations	1: MP 0.0 to 1.3	<i>No additional cost beyond current maintenance</i>
MaineDOT Patrol & Repairs	2: MP 1.3 to 26.5	
1: Restore Rail Service on Existing Corridor		
1A: Freight Rail Service (Class 1-2)	1: MP 0.0 to 1.7	NA
	2: MP 1.7 to 26.5	\$13,400,000 - \$31,000,000
1A TOTAL		\$13,400,000 - \$31,000,000
1B: Passenger Rail Service (Class 3)	1: MP 0.0 to 1.7	\$60,000,000
	2: MP 1.7 to 26.5	\$214,000,000
1B TOTAL		\$274,000,000
2: Interim Trail Until Rail (TUR)		
2A: Gravel/Stone Dust Trail	1: MP 0.0 to 1.7	\$19,100,000
	2: MP 1.7 to 26.5	\$28,400,000
2A TOTAL		\$47,500,000
2B: Paved Trail	1: MP 0.0 to 1.7	\$19,200,000
	2: MP 1.7 to 26.5	\$35,800,000
2B TOTAL		\$55,000,000
3: Rail with Trail (RWT)		
3A: Gravel/Stone Dust Trail	1: MP 0.0 to 1.7	\$19,300,000
	2: MP 1.7 to 26.5	\$70,700,000
3A TOTAL		\$90,000,000
3B: Paved Trail	1: MP 0.0 to 1.7	\$19,300,000
	2: MP 1.7 to 26.5	\$75,000,000
3B TOTAL		\$94,300,000

Economic Benefits: Summary

This study included an economic impact analysis of the various options for the state-owned rail corridor. While more detail can be found in both Chapter 4 and the Appendix of the Study, the key take-aways include:

- Based on economic modeling, the direct investments in any of the scenarios will have ripple effect through the regional and state economy (though varying with each alternative)
- Related to the preservation of the corridor with restoration of rail service
 - Development potential exists at future passenger rail stations, especially for housing and mixed-use buildings
 - Either freight or passenger rail service will induce increased employment and economic activity
 - Passenger rail service will provide a commuting alternative between Lewiston/Auburn and Portland and could lead to reduction of motor vehicle traffic, emissions, and transportation costs (though a more robust transportation study is needed to understand the level of impact)
 - Passenger rail service promotes more active lifestyle via walking and bicycling to/from station stops, and can lead to reduced health care costs
- Related to conversion of the corridor for interim trail use (either TUR or RWT configuration)
 - A strong baseline of potential trail users exists along the corridor based on socio-economic metrics, area population density, and demand for walking and bicycling facilities
 - Potential for increased consumer activity by trail users could lead to \$3.5m to \$5.3m in annual spending
 - Presence of either a TUR or a RWT has potential to show a positive fiscal impact on residential property values along the corridor
 - Offering expanded recreational facilities, an interim trail will encourage more active lifestyles and can lead to reduced health care costs

V. Council Recommendations to the MaineDOT Commissioner

Recommendation 1: Interim Trail until Rail (7 members)

The Rail Use Advisory Council recommends ***Interim Trail until Rail*** (multi-use trail using the existing rail bed). This alternative includes removal of the existing tracks and ties and developing a multi-use trail on the former track bed. The recommendation was made by seven (7) out of fifteen (15) Council members.

This non-rail use recommendation by the Council for the rail corridor is considered interim in nature, because all such rail corridors must be preserved for future rail use as provided in the [State Rail Preservation Act](#).

Recommendation 2: Rail with Trail (5 members)

The recommendation **Rail with Trail** (multi-use trail adjacent to the existing rail bed) was supported by five (5) of (15) Council members. This alternative maintains the existing tracks and ties in current condition and establishes an adjacent and parallel multi-use trail with either a gravel/stone dust or paved surface. Grade differences in certain areas of the corridor will require retaining walls to support a new trail. Rail with Trail includes construction of new bridges, adjacent to existing rail bridges, to carry the trail over roadways and waterways. Additionally, this alternative also includes construction of new overhead bridges (i.e., bridges that carry roadways over the rail tracks) that are wide enough to allow rail and trail where the existing bridge clearance is insufficient.

Recommendation 3: Rail Use (1 member)

A single member (1) of the Council voted for **Rail Use**. This alternative provides for possible restoration of rail service in the future with potential rehabilitation of the existing railroad infrastructure to support reestablishment of rail operations.

Finally, two (2) members of the Council abstained from voting altogether.