

Public Comments Summary – Lower Road RUAC

November 30, 2022 – July 31, 2023



Background

Public comments were solicited for the “MaineDOT RUAC Supporting Study – Lower Road” in a variety of channels between November 2022 and July 2023, including a virtual public meeting on June 22, 2023, RUAC meetings, email, and online comment forms. Specifically, opportunities for verbal comment were provided during seven separate RUAC meetings (all virtual) and through email comments, including 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 and categorized.

Key Findings

Summary Table

	Supports Trail (interim or otherwise)	Supports Rail with Trail	Supports Restoration of Rail Service	Neutral/ Other	Total
Public comments made at RUAC meetings	21	2	12	2	37
Public comments at 6/22 public meeting	32	6	11	4	53
Public comments made via e-mail	149	7	29	3	188
Total (including repeat comments)	202	15	52	9	278
Repeat comments	32	4	27	1	64
Net Total (excludes repeat comments)	170 (79%)	11 (5%)	25 (12%)	8 (4%)	214

Responses Supporting Trail

Approximately 79% of the public comments indicated support for a trail, which included comments specifying rail to trail conversion, interim trail, and/or trail until rail. An additional 5% specifically supported a rail with trail configuration. Of the comments reviewed, reasons and concerns cited for the strong support of the interim trail included:

- Health benefits and outdoor recreation benefits
- Economic benefits and trails being an asset for the community
- Traffic safety concerns

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- Alternative transportation benefits
- Environmental concerns and benefits
- Social benefits and community cohesion
- Improved livability and quality of life

Health was a significant category of benefits referenced throughout the comments, with 20% of respondents indicating the trail could provide health benefits generally, with mental health, physical health, and/or general wellness. 24% felt that it could encourage recreation and outdoor recreation, 6% such as the benefits of nature exposure, noted also as beneficial for mental health. Another 13% specified the health benefits of encouraging more exercise, generally, with the trail.

Economic benefits and tourism was another top category of benefits referenced, with 22% seeing the potential for general economic benefits due to the trail, such as inducing economic development and downtown revitalization.

19% noted that the trail could induce tourism to the area, and that small businesses would benefit from increased foot traffic. Several respondents noted the trail would create new access to otherwise inaccessible unique natural areas such as Merrymeeting Bay. 13% of respondents cited the potential for such an amenity and asset to add value to the community, with potential for increased property values, and saw it as an investment in the future. Many respondents noted the potential for the trail to also influence new residents of varying ages to move to the area. A few commenters noted the opportunity to highlight heritage and cultural preservation through informational signage along trails to educate visitors about local history.

An economic concern was highlighted in an official position statement from a representative of the Bicycle Coalition of Maine (BCM), which opposed the rail with trail option. The BCM rep cited the high expense of rail with trail would mean it would take too many years to implement, if it were implemented at all. Several other commenters felt the interim trail would be a better use of funds in the short term and more cost effective and viable than the rail with trail or passenger rail alone.

Traffic safety was another category of concern. 15% of comments primarily noted a strong desire for safe separation from vehicles, and that most roads felt increasingly unsafe to walk and bike on, noting speeding drivers and the increase in aggressive driver behavior (3%). Another 9% of respondents shared that their neighborhood lacked any safe place to walk or bike, with several referencing high-speed roadways with either no shoulder or a shoulder too narrow for walking or biking. 12% noted that this trail would be ideal for children, and that it would be perhaps the only safe active transportation option for children, families. Many of these respondents stated a strong desire to use the trail on a frequent basis if it were constructed.

19% of comments cited **alternative transportation benefits**, with an interest in using a trail for trips including commuting, errands, shopping and dining, and visiting friends and family. Additionally, by connecting towns with the trail, many thought it would be useful for discovering

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new businesses and destinations, exploring surrounding towns, and small local adventures. There was a sentiment of not just wanting to complete necessary errands, but also to travel on the trail to shop and dine for fun.

Environmental concerns comprised of a total of 12% of responses. Several noted preserving the nature along the trail that a new train would disrupt, minimally impacting the surrounding forested areas, and protecting forest animals and flora. Many of these commenters also noted the environmental benefits of emission reductions through less driving, cutting down on motor vehicle dependency.

Social benefits were noted in 9% of the comments and referenced concepts such as the potential source of civic pride for the towns to have the trail, as well as pride for the beauty of Maine, in the natural landscape and lifestyle that a trail would align with and support. Themes also included improved community cohesion, foster a sense of belonging, neighborhood engagement, creating more opportunities for local residents to interact with one another. Other commenters noted equity benefits of the trail for low-income residents as a free and accessible resource for physical activity.

Improved livability, desirability of community, and improved quality of life were some of the themes encompassed in 6% of the comments, with several comments noting that retirees wish to use such a trail.

Other notes on preferences: Motorized vs. Non-Motorized Trail Use

While 4% of commenters specifically indicated preference for non-motorized trail usage, 8% of respondents also voiced their preference for a motorized multi-use trail. Specifically mentioned was a desire for vehicles such as snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles, referencing examples of other trails throughout Maine where this is currently practiced. Comments also noted potential economic benefits tied to the tourism generated for this use, and for the purchasing of permits for these motorized uses, potential for additional funding toward such a trail. In general, this group of respondents feel that expanding the modes allowed on the trail would increase activity and use of the facility and take advantage of the winter snow trail conditions.

Several respondents also supported the use of the trail by horses.

Groups Providing Comments in Support of a Trail

Various groups had representatives speak in support of an interim trail using the variety of methods, including:

- Bicycle Coalition of Maine
- Maine Trails Coalition
- Kennebec Estuary Land Trust (KELT)
- Gardiner Main Street
- Bowdoinham Comprehensive Planning Committee
- IAMAW Local Lodge S6 – Women’s Committee

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- Maine Health
- Access Health
- Get Active Southern Mid Coast
- Bowdoin Farmer's Market
- Healthy Communities of the Capital Area* (Special Projects Mgr.)
- Maine ATV Coalition* (President)
- ATV Maine* (President)
- Topsham Trail Rider ATV Club* (President)
- Topsham Trailrider ATV Club (President – Jenny Little)
- East Coast Greenway Alliance*
- Friends of the Kennebec Rail Trail*(Board Member)
- Eastern Trail* (Employee)

Notes on abutters

Of the respondents supporting the trail, two respondents stated they lived close to the rail line, and 8 specifically abutted the rail right of way.

Some respondents noted which community they reside in, which included:

- Augusta
- Bowdoinham
- Brunswick
- Dresden
- Freeport
- Gardiner
- Hallowell
- New Gloucester
- Richmond
- Standish
- Topsham

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Responses Supporting Restoration of Rail Service

12% of the public comments indicated support for restoring passenger rail service, including several supporting the rail with trail option. This group of respondents generally felt strongly that the restoration of passenger rail service would bring great benefit to the region and serve a greater cross section of the area's population than active transportation alone. They were concerned that removal of the rail infrastructure would be a disservice to the community. Many respondents noted that demand for rail is high, and since Maine is moving to increase rail, this corridor should be part of that trend. This sentiment was also cited to rebut the point that the rail lines have been unused for 40 years.

Of the comments, reasons and concerns cited for their support of the restoration of rail service included the following areas:

- Environmental benefits/climate issues
- Economic benefits
- Alternative transportation benefits & creating affordable transit options

Environmental benefits and fighting climate change were a top commenting category for this group of respondents, referenced in that the rail could provide more alternate transportation options (28%). 8% of comments noted that a passenger rail option could reduce overall vehicle traffic and congestion, along with a reduction in shipping/trucking methods using fossil fuels.

Economic benefits were noted, citing benefits both in terms of rail adding to the regional economy, spurring economic development, and supporting tourism through linking to other scenic rails (20%). Respondents also noted rail could support the development of affordable housing options (4%).

Alternative transportation benefits were also a priority for this group of respondents, that the restoration of rail service would provide more alternate transportation options (4%). These benefits were also cited in terms of providing year-round affordable transit options to residents, some without cars, (20% of comments), and that it would help a wider range of constituents with transportation access or mobility challenges, for example, residents who may not be willing or able to utilize active transportation (walking, biking, rolling) as their mode of transportation (4%). One respondent noted rail as an ideal option in case gas prices increase further. Another respondent felt that rail is a superior alternative transportation mode, as the potential length of a trail would not be a realistic transportation corridor considering most bicycle trips are under three miles in length. An additional suggestion was made to consider the use of rail bikes as they allow rails to remain but bicyclists to use corridor.

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Groups Providing Comments in Support of a Rail Service

Various groups had representatives speak on their behalf in support of the restoration of passenger rail, including:

- Maine Rail Group
- Mid-Maine Chamber of Commerce
- Rail User's Network (Richard Rudolph)
- Maine Rail Transit Coalition (Anthony Donovan)
- TrainRiders Northeast/RailRiders Northeast (Bruce Sleeper)
- Rail Explorers Rail Bike Service* (Interested in providing service on rails)

Note: Ed Hanscom, a representative from the Maine Rail Group, submitted the names of 611 individuals (roughly 80% residing in Maine) who expressed support for the "Petition in Support of Bringing Passenger Rail to Bangor". Signatures were gathered after at the 2023 Maine Transportation Conference, denoting support for passenger rail service in the region, specifically "from Brunswick, ME to Bangor, ME over the state-owned 'Lower Road' to Augusta and then on CSX's rail line to Waterville and Bangor." The group's representative also included a point by point rebuttal to claims about the benefits of a trail over rail in "Adopted Trail Support Resolution" from the Lower Road RUAC website.

Notes on respondents

Of the respondents supporting the restoration of rail, only one respondent stated they lived close to the rail line.

Some respondents noted which community they reside in, which included:

- Augusta
- Bangor
- Brunswick
- Chelsea
- Harrington
- Hiram
- Hope Harbor
- Orono
- Portland
- Waterville

Some commenters in support of rail service noted a concern with potential RUAC bias against the rail option and toward trail, along with concern with the process in terms of lack of representation from Waterville and Bangor on the Council. Another comment related to the desire for bike infrastructure improvements within towns, not necessarily on rail corridor.

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Other Responses

4% of the public comments deviated from "Supports Trail" or "Supports Restoration of Rail Service" and were categorized as "Other". These responses did not specify support or opposition to the project, and consisted primarily of questions about the project, such as rail service ridership, operating costs, bus service; rail station siting; analysis sources/citations; set back requirements, and potential trail impacts to conservation lands and wildlife crossings.

One individual living near the rail corridor cited concern regarding a lack of public restroom facilities along the potential trail corridor, and whether that might apply pressure on nearby homes to provide such services. Another was concerned with safety and privacy of living near the potential trail, and some were concerned with safety and the potential for crime along a remote and rural trail.

Of the respondents in this category, two respondents stated their property abutted the rail right of way.