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### Rail link could be engine for economy

The state's control of the Mountain Division line raises prospects for new train service west from Portland.

By JOHN RICHARDSON, Staff Writer

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STANDISH — The state has bought the final stretch of railway needed to re-establish train service between Portland and Fryeburg, and beyond.

The recent purchase of a 5.2-mile section between Westbrook and Windham means that advocates in Augusta and the communities along the old Mountain Division Rail Line will shift efforts toward repairing the rails themselves, a project that would cost about \$20 million.

The land purchase also has lifted hopes that a passenger and freight service could generate economic development and reduce truck traffic through the suburban and rural towns west of Portland.

"Any time we can look at something like this that can move traffic off our roads, we're all for it," said Standish Town Councilor Philip Pomerleau. "We figure we can eliminate about 25,000 trucks a year traveling on the Route 113 corridor."

And, he said, Portlanders may be riding trains to the Fryeburg Fair in five to 10 years. "There's all kinds of things we see that can happen, but it can't happen without the rail being there. All it does is open huge amounts of opportunity."

The Department of Transportation paid \$805,000 for the last stretch of rail, money approved by voters as part of a statewide bond referendum last year.

The purchase was completed in mid-May and will be announced formally on Aug. 1 during a celebration next to the rail line at the Standish boat launch.

"We now have the beginnings of what can happen here in the Lakes Region," said state Sen. Bill Diamond, D-Windham. "We can engage our congressional people and say, 'Look, we're ready to go with this.'"

The state had already spent \$110,000 on a feasibility study, which was presented to the Legislature in December, and about \$1 million to buy the 40 miles of rail from Windham to Fryeburg in 1997.

The Mountain Division rail operated as a private line until 1984, when westbound rail traffic shifted south to Massachusetts. Pan Am Railway, formerly known as Guilford Rail Systems, still uses the section of line between Westbrook and Portland and has agreed to negotiate an access agreement for that section when the service is established, according to the transportation department. The remaining sections are either owned by the state or accessible through easements.

The 50-mile-long rail line extends from Portland to Standish, skirts the southwest shore of Sebago Lake and then follows the Saco River and Route 113 to Fryeburg, where it connects to active railways in New Hampshire.

Freight ultimately could move all the way from Portland to Chicago, said Nate Moulton of the transportation department. "You could connect to the national system," he said.

While the newly acquired section is overgrown, other sections of the rail line are now used as a recreational trail, including a 4.7-mile section from Gambo Road in Windham to Johnson Field in Standish. Officials said the right of way can probably accommodate both trains and a pedestrian trail, as long as the trails aren't right next to the tracks.

"We have to be sure it's built so they can coexist," Moulton said.

The possibility of moving freight back and forth on rails, rather than roads, is enticing in communities such as Standish.

Routes 113 and 25 now are busy with trucks carrying cargo such as gravel toward Portland and oil and gasoline toward Fryeburg.

"We figure we can eliminate about 25,000 trucks a year traveling in the Route 113 corridor," said Pomerleau.

Access to rail, especially with the rising cost of diesel fuel, could also attract new industry into southwestern Maine, he said.

And passenger service could bring visitors from the Portland area, without their cars, he said. "I figure you can load people in Portland and take them to the Fryeburg Fair. That might not be as far out there as we think."

The rising price of fuel is clearly adding momentum to the effort. A state study showed the service to be economically feasible when diesel was \$2.50 a gallon, a little more than half of today's price, Moulton said.

The Department of Transportation will use some leftover funds to shore up the abandoned section of rail and keep it from eroding or weakening further. It's now up to the state and other advocates to find money to prepare the rails for trains.

Making the line suitable even for low-speed travel — 10 to 15 mph — is expected to cost \$18 million.

Accommodating 25 to 30 mph traffic — a speed suitable for local freight and for excursion passenger service —

would cost an estimated \$20 million.

Establishing a commuter-speed service – 40 to 60 mph – would require replacing rails and an investment of about \$42 million, according to the Department of Transportation.

A commuter line is clearly a more long-term possibility, advocates say, and might someday become feasible if fuel prices keep rising.

Raising \$18 million to \$20 million to start the service for freight and tourist excursions will take years, advocates said. But the timing is right when it comes to applying for federal funding, said Moulton.

"It starts to make some sense, with the price of fuel," he said. "In past years, rail money has been hard to come by, and now there's this sort of renaissance. It's good for the air, it's good for the economy, and it's good for the roads."

Once the rails are ready for train traffic, the state would negotiate with a private operator to establish the service. Some regional rail operators have been closely following the initiative's progress.

"I think you would find quite a bit of interest," Moulton said.

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