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The chance of trains to Fryeburg now more than a wistful hope

Maine has bought the last link in a line that could take a lot of traffic off Route 302.

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The state's purchase of the last stretch of railroad right-of-way between Portland and Fryeburg opens the door to a larger investment in restoring it to active service.

The track, known as the Mountain Division Rail Line, would need substantial repairs costing tens of millions of dollars before it could handle freight or passenger traffic.

Yet, in the eyes of some who live along its route and in the hopes and plans of state transportation officials, the 50-mile stretch presents a tremendous opportunity to offer an alternative to truck traffic along routes 302 and 113.

The Maine Department of Transportation spent \$805,000 for the latest stretch of line, a 5.2-mile section between Westbrook and Windham.

The money came from a bond issue approved by voters last year. The purchase completed a process begun in 1997, when the state bought the Windham-Fryeburg stretch for about \$1 million.

Parts of the track are in disrepair, and others are also being used as pedestrian trails, a use that may continue even if the line is reactivated.

The hope, according to officials, is that a rejuvenated freight line could draw cargo now being carried by trucks. According to some estimates, perhaps as many as 25,000 truckloads a year could be shifted over to rail, saving an immense amount of fuel and pollution.

If the line is reopened, it would link up with active lines to the west through New Hampshire, but the state can't afford the full amount of the repairs. With the line completely in state hands, however, more federal funds could become available.

If they can be found, the line could be in operation in five to 10 years. At least now the fundraising can begin.

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