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Plan to restore Mountain Division Rail Line gets rolling

By **Leslie H. Dixon**, Staff Writer
Saturday, August 2, 2008

STANDISH - State and local officials drove the golden spike into the former Mountain Division Rail Line on Friday to mark the purchase of a 5.2 mile stretch of rail that eventually could allow trains to travel from Portland to Fryeburg.



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It is believed that a rail line could take as many as 25,000 truck trips off area roads each year.

"Let the track to the future begin. We cannot and will not let this opportunity go by," declared Sen. Bill Diamond, D-Windham, to a large crowd of officials and area residents. They turned out on the warm, overcast morning at the Standish boat launch to enjoy music by the White Mountain Boys and to hear officials describe the process and benefits of the purchase.

The track was abandoned by freight trains in 1983 and by passenger trains 50 years ago, but it was once a popular route for summer tourists going through the Sebago Lake Region, up into the White Mountains and beyond. A train station on the southern shores of Sebago Lake where the ceremony took place was once the hub of activity.

"It's been 50 years since anyone has ridden on this line. We can do that again. We have to do that again," said Diamond, who sponsored a bill to study the cost of establishing rail service along the line and held the pocket watch his grandfather carried while working on the same line decades ago. "I have his watch with me today to remind me this is the time."


Funds from state transportation bonds were used to purchase the section of line after local groups, including the Baldwin Business Association, Train Riders Northeast, Mountain Division Alliance and the Route 113 Corridor Committee, which promotes area economic development, actively sought the purchase.


"This holds the greatest hope for bringing Maine jobs back to the region," said Caroline Paras, a planner for the Greater Portland Council of Governments.

Department of Transportation Commissioner David Cole said the project took a grassroots effort and did not happen overnight. He called the project particularly timely in light of the high cost of petroleum-based transportation and heating fuel in Maine. "These people had vision," he said of the effort to get the project off the ground.

"It creates a lot of hope and expectation for a lot of people," Standish Town Manager Gordon Billington said.

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After the ceremony, Department of Transportation Rail Director Nate Moulton drove a railroad car down the old line for members of the media and officials. Although the rail lines have been maintained since they were abandoned 25 years ago, Moulton said, "If we're going to make this happen it will need a good piece of money to rebuild the track."

Asked how difficult it would be to rebuild, Moulton said. "It's not rocket science."

The state would lease the line, but not operate it it, he said.

To make it economically feasible, Moulton said, the line must have several anchor customers, for example, some of the gravel operators in Hiram who, he said, might ship box loads of gravel by rail rather than road in the future.

A 2007 study commissioned by the Department of Transportation found that not only could the line take 25,000 truck trips off the road annually, but also it could support excursion rail trips to the port of Portland and Fryeburg. It also has the potential for commuter rail service.

The Mountain Division line was closed because it duplicated the functions of a more southerly line used by Guilford Rail, officials said. When the line was at its busiest, the Maine Central Railroad used the Mountain Division to move freight in and out of Maine and to connect the national rail service in the Midwest.



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