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Officials excited about potential return of rail

South Windham project is part of larger state transportation plan linking Portland to Fryeburg

By Dawn De Busk

As Julia Dawson settled into her seat and scanned the scenery from the window of the hyrail vehicle -- a Maine Department of Transportation maintenance truck that is converted to travel along the railroad tracks -- she let out a soft sigh of contentment and revealed her English roots through her accent, saying, "I love that sound. It's very therapeutic."

As the hyrail vehicle clicked and clacked along the railroad tracks parallel with the shoreline of Sebago Lake and Saturday's nearly noontime sunrays mirrored themselves in the gentle waves, Dawson, the senior transportation planner for Southern Maine Regional Planning (SMRP), talked about her role in the state's acquisition of a section of the Mountain Division railroad corridor, the trains she rode daily in England, and the difference in attitudes held by Americans and Europeans toward trains and cars.

"I rode the train everyday to work so this is a very sentimental sound for me," Dawson said, explaining that people in England still see cars as a luxury and consider trains to be the preferred mode of transportation.

If it's ingrained into American society to drive a vehicle, and taking the bus or train is considered the option of low-income citizens, it might be a difficult task to change the mindset of Mainers and have them embrace the idea of commuting via rails to jobs in Greater Portland, she said. That's a task for another employee at SMRP, David Carpenter, who goes into Maine schools and educates students on alternative transportation modes through a program called Kids In Transportation, according to Dawson. However, commuter service is only one of the potential benefits of having train service from Portland to Fryeburg.

The primary goal of a future operational railroad is the shipping of commercial goods between communities close to the railroad tracks and the Portland seaport, according to MDOT Commissioner David Cole.

During Saturday morning's ceremony

. The \$800,000 used to buy the right-of-way land is part of two transportation bond packages -- OK'd by voters in 2007 and in June of this year, he said.

The land purchase completed the connection of the state-owned railroad corridor, and opened up numerous possibilities, according to Cole.

"We don't expect commuter service to start tomorrow. This isn't going to replace the roads," he said.

The future trains that will ride along the railroad tracks have the potential to take 25,000 trucks off the road, Cole said, referring to the commercial truck traffic that virtually wears out Route 35.

To view the full study on the economic and engineering feasibility of a railway line between Portland and Fryeburg, go to www.maine.gov/mdot/freight/freight-home.php.

The cost benefits might be seen by local businesses for shipping gravel and other local commodities via the train to a shipping vessel in Portland Harbor, and then onto buyers, he said.

Cole emphasized that owning the railroad right-of-way preserves transportation options for the future. "We may need this corridor for means we haven't even foreseen," he said.

In addition, it will allow MDOT to secure an intra-modal system that includes roads and highways, the railways and sea shipping, Cole said. "Where energy prices are now, we are going to have to help our people and businesses be cost-effective, and the rail is part of that," he said. When asked about the project being subsidized, he said most government forms of transportation are.

Although Cole was trying to address practicalities, there was no shortage of visions of what a train running through the Lakes Region could offer.

During her speech as part of the official ceremony, the Economic and



Rep. Bill Diamond (D-Windham) helped pound in a gold-covered railroad spike at the close of the Aug. 1 ceremony to celebrate the state's purchase of the last of the land for the Mountain Division railroad. Michael Hartwell photo

riding the rails to the Fryeburg Fair in the agine if you will, bicyclists from all over the world arriving in Boston and taking the Down Easter to Portland, connecting with the (Mountain Division Railroad) and taking biking excursions at stops along the train."

Through GPCOG, Paras was a driving force in getting the land acquisition accomplished from its inception five year ago when a meeting took place with Standish officials, who hoped to reduce truck traffic on Route 35 and stimulate economic development in their town.

Maine Realtor Tony Donovan, who has been coordinating Maine

autumn. Im in South Windham. And you create commercial development there," he said.

"Rail to me is the answer to our energy crisis. We don't have to drill offshore," Donovan said.

Windham Town Councilor Donna Chapman plans to discover ways the town could prepare for the completion of the rail, and booster economic development in places that have lost their luster over the decades.

"This could impact the Keddy Mill project. If we could use the antique train stop in South Windham, people could be dropped off at the old train station," Chapman said.

entitled Tracks To The Future, the real reason for celebration was the recent purchase by the state transportation department of the 5.2-mile section of the Mountain Division Railroad Corridor that stretches between South Windham and Westbrook, according to Cole

Community Planner with the Greater Portland Council of Governments (GPCOG) Caroline Paras described the potential of the train.

"Imagine if you will, gravel traveling by rail from Westbrook to Portland and being loaded on a barge and shipped to New York City," Paras said. "Imagine if you will, residents

Railway Transportation Forums at venues around the state, pushes the economic development of areas along the railroad line. He envisions mixed-use development -- zones shared by residential and commercial space -- cropping up along the railway.

"You look for where the railroad crosses a main road -- like Route 202

"South Windham could become a scenic village with flourishing businesses again," she said.

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