

Train whistles for Saco River Valley in future?

By Mike Corrigan
Staff Writer

STANDISH — Where you see empty land, scrubby bushes and a deteriorating railbed, David Knapp sees a brighter future for the Saco River Valley.

"I believe in rail," the Fryeburg selectman summarized as he led last Wednesday evening's Route 113 Corridor Planning Committee meeting.

Specifically, Knapp thinks a refurbished Mountain Division rail line could jolt the Saco River Valley to a new level of economic health.

Knapp, the meeting coordinator, did not stand alone in his enthusiasm for reviving the old Mountain Division line, which is now owned by the state. A packed roomful of business and civic leaders said they would welcome a revived rail line, connecting Portland to Conway, as it could provide enormous economic and transportation benefits to all the commuters, businesses and communities in between those



WORK TO DO — The Mountain Division railbed and right-of-way is owned and controlled by the State of Maine. Before any trains run on them however, work would have to be done to refurbish the rails and ties. (Corrigan Photo)

two points.

And what lies smack between those two points? The Saco River Valley, of course!

There was ample cold water available to dampen any overheated engines. To reopen the mothballed line, an operator would have to be found — the state is not allowed to be in the

railroad business. Millions in equipment would have to be purchased. And rebuilding the railbed alone could cost up to a million dollars a mile.

Also, significantly, there may not be enough freight potential to justify all those expenses, in any event, said Matt Jacobson. He ought to

know; he revived the St. Lawrence & Atlantic Railroad a decade back. That rail line, running only a few miles north of the Mountain Division line, dominates short haul train freight in southern Maine.

Despite all the difficulties, many came away from the meeting believing the Mountain Division could be, as one railroading veteran insisted, "a gold mine."

Why? Because of potential commuter and excursion traffic. Demand, long quiet, could be developing, what with connections to Amtrak's Downeaster line, Portland to Boston, and cruise ship upgrades in Portland. With fuel prices rising, work forces from the Saco River Valley towns could "take the train" into the Portland area. There is also the potential for a fruitful tie-in at the state line with the Conway area, which already has its own "scenic railroad," as well as built-in tourist capacity and potential.

The Maine Department of

Transportation has authority for the old rail line. Nate Moulton of that agency said last week, studies would have to be done; the legislature would have to be brought aboard and encouraged. Area legislators said they would back any serious effort, should the potential for success be apparent. A lot of work would have to continue at the local level, too.

Senator Bill Diamond said he saw "enough enthusiasm" to get a venture started, getting all of a community together to back such a process is "a difficult piece," he said, and the Saco River Valley has made a good start. "I do think it's doable," Senator Diamond said. He added, "This project needs a

champion." Fryeburg's State Rep. Bobbie Muse said she liked what she heard last week, too, and encouraged civic leaders to keep pushing ahead.

Tuesday, the day before the public forum, dozens had toured the Mountain Division line via high-rail cars, to get a feel for the layout and its condition. At one point, Knapp said with a smile, the railbed was so sketchy, he was advised to "close (his) eyes."

So, work would remain to be done, after all the convincing is through.

Years of work, perhaps. However, Wayne Davis of

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Saco Valley RR?

(Continued from Page 1A) Trainriders Northeast noted, "If we had to do all these studies for the Downeaster we would not have that train today. It's a matter of choices... If you want a railroad, you can have a railroad."

But if you wait for the numbers and projections to give you some clear go-ahead, nothing may ever happen, Davis indicated. Like much public transportation, rail projects often require a subsidy to balance the operational books. But the spin-off benefits, environmental savings and extra business and traveling conveniences created could well overtop subsidized deficit expenditures, by millions and millions of dollars, several insisted.

Bootstraps

It's the old Maine story. The valley of the Saco River is a beautiful place. Beautiful, and economically challenged.

A rail line revival is merely the largest of projects on the agenda for the Route 113 Corridor Committee. In October, there will be a forum on manufacturing, and in November, a program on "The Creative Economy." The standing committee is advised by the Greater Portland Council of Governments and the Southern Maine Regional Planning Commission.

Wednesday, experts from all over the map attended the rail forum. Knapp moderated skillfully, offering insights of his own. Hilary Jones, a Fryeburg innkeeper, said her town would welcome excursion passengers.

She saw other advantages. "It would open people in this area up for better jobs in Portland. You can get a lot of work done on a train," she said.

GPCOG's Caroline Paras provided a history of the Mountain Division, the southern third of the 1875-vintage Portland & Ogdensburg Railroad. Matt Jacobson talked about the challenges of short line railroading, emphasizing that getting help from a larger railroad, with tie-ins to routes and equipment, can be a big part of success. Having management and crews that "know their stuff" is also huge, he said.

Jon Shute, general manager of the Maine Eastern Railroad, also spoke. "Any short line is only as good as its power (locomotives)," Shute said. "Fortunately, equipment is available, it's out there, and should be for the next 15 to 20 years."

Paras noted that there are 10,000 commuters coming out of the Saco River Valley each day. The train should be an option for some percentage of those people, she said.

Wayne Davis noted with pride that the Downeaster is one of the success stories of Amtrak railroading. "So there's a real potential for tie-ins with that line to Boston, as well," he said. "Other inter-modal links could well be exploited, also."

The magnitude of the needed rail bed upgrades, and thus the expense, would depend on the type of traffic hauled, Jacobson said. Generally, freight and



A VIEW up the tracks near Brownfield.

commuter trains face scheduling difficulties, trying to move together in coordinated timetables over one short line track. Also, freights usually travel more slowly, so tracks must be rebuilt to different standards, depending on the type of traffic that will be run over them.

The Maine DOT's Nate Moulton said that the first step should be an engineering assessment coupled with an economic assessment. To get the project going, the "political piece" must fall into place, or perhaps be pushed into place, as others hinted. There's a government piece, Moulton said. There's a business piece, too. And there's a public piece.

Given all the work that remains to be done, a revived railroad may yet be far off. But in a real sense, it's not that far away. After all, the right-of-way and the track run right through the heart of the Saco River Valley, and they're already government-owned.