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## Westward, ho?

By JUSTIN ELLIS, Portland Press Herald Staff Writer  
Portland Press Herald / Maine Sunday Telegram

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Sunday, April 8, 2007

On the day after the Maine Central Railroad completed its last run on the Mountain Division rail line in April 1958, the Maine Sunday Telegram summed it up like this:

"The Mountain Division was long famed for its picturesque route which wound through Crawford Notch and the White Mountains region. Many have claimed that the beauty of its views in the brightly foliated fall was unsurpassed. Lack of business caused its demise."

It has been almost 50 years since the last passenger train made its way from the White Mountains into Portland, but a bill pending in the Legislature could be the first step in reviving rail travel in western Maine.

A measure from state Sen. Bill Diamond, D-Windham, asks for \$80,000 for an engineering study to evaluate the track's condition. The results would help determine whether having passenger rail service between Portland and Fryeburg could become a reality.

Renewing train travel holds the promise of new tourism opportunities, which could boost the regional economy and possibly reduce traffic.

The proposal is expected to go before the Legislature in the next few weeks, following recent approval by the Transportation Committee.

Re-establishing rail service has been endorsed by Gov. John Baldacci. And last week, the Legislature approved a \$295 million borrowing package that includes \$110 million for transportation projects, including \$13.52 million for passenger and freight rail service.

Of that, \$1.25 million would go to the Mountain Division line to help fund projects, including an engineering study and renovation of a two-mile stretch of track between south Windham and Westbrook.

The entire bond package will be voted on in three referendums, in June, November and June 2008.

The former Mountain Division rail line runs more than 50 miles, from Portland to Standish, then parallel to Route 113 on through to Baldwin and eventually Fryeburg.

"Who wouldn't want to ride the train to Fryeburg to the Fryeburg Fair and not be tied up on (Route) 302?" Standish Town Councilor Louis Stack said.

Stack said communities from Portland to Fryeburg could benefit from the train. Companies in Portland could benefit from a commuter line for employees, while industries in western Maine could use the line to ship lumber, granite or other goods.

Diamond said the engineering study would assess the condition of the tracks, bridges and culverts along the line and list what improvements would be needed to handle trains.

"Not to have a pun here, but I think it's on the right track," Diamond said.

The bill has bipartisan support and backing from legislators who are from towns that would be affected by the railroad, he said.

With information from the engineering study in hand, the state could begin estimating the cost of repairing tracks, attracting a railroad operator and determining who might use the train.

The bill originally was proposed by former state Rep. Michael Shaw, D-Standish, who gave up his seat to state Rep. Gary Moore, R-Standish, last fall after a recount in a close race.

Shaw, an Amtrak conductor, said he believes train service between Portland and Fryeburg could be a big success. With traffic congestion in Westbrook, Gorham and Standish, many commuters would enjoy another option, he said.

Several obstacles could prevent trains from rumbling through Standish, Baldwin or Hiram in the near future, however.

Although the state owns 40 miles of the Mountain Division line between Fryeburg and Windham, Pan Am Railways owns 11 miles from Portland to Westbrook, said Nathan Moulton, who manages railroad transportation for the state Department of Transportation.

The state would need to negotiate an agreement with Pan Am Railways - formerly Guilford - or buy the remaining track for any trains to reach Portland, he said.

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David Fink, president of Pan Am, said his company has had discussions with the state about the stretch of track between Portland and Westbrook. Fink said a deal with the state could be beneficial to Pan Am by offering more possibilities for freight service.

Moulton, whose office would be responsible for performing the engineering study on the Mountain Division line, said the state would need to identify companies that might ship materials along the line, as well as the cost of shipping freight.

Eventually, officials would look at whether demand for commuter rail exists and how many passengers might use it.

In order to re-establish any rail service, the state would have to contract with a railroad operator who would maintain the track and manage freight or passenger lines.

David Farmer, a spokesman for the governor, said Baldacci sees rail transportation as a way to strengthen the economy and help the environment by taking cars and trucks off the road.

Last year, Baldacci signed an executive order calling for extending passenger service northward to Brunswick and Lewiston-Auburn from Portland.

Farmer said the Amtrak Downeaster's success from Portland to Boston shows that there is a demand for passenger rail in the state.

Wayne Davis, chairman of Train Riders Northeast, said it seemed like an uphill battle to convince people service offered by the Downeaster would work.

Last fiscal year, ridership grew 31 percent from the prior fiscal year. At the same time, Amtrak has added a fifth daily round trip between Portland and Boston.

By serving commuters from western Maine and moving freight to New Hampshire and beyond, the Mountain Division line seems as though it could become a reality, Davis said.

"We can see that it's not just pie in the sky," he said.

Fryeburg Selectman David Knapp said train service could turn around the fortunes of many western Maine businesses.

"I think that reactivating the rail line can be a catalyst for a number of economic and entrepreneurial endeavors," he said.

Riders from Portland could take short trips out for bicycling, nature walks or visits to bed-and-breakfasts, Knapp said.

And the train could be the perfect companion to the Mountain Division Alliance, which has worked to establish bicycling and walking trails that run alongside the railroad. The trail is currently open between Westbrook and Standish.

Ed Pierce operates the Hiram Station Museum, which stands next to the Mountain Division line in Hiram. Pierce, 70, is a former conductor whose father and grandfather worked on the Boston & Maine Railroad. He said trains are in his blood.

Along with model trains, steam-engine schematics and other rail memorabilia, a caboose that was once used on the Maine Central Railroad is on display for visitors to the museum.

Pierce said he sees the potential for a new generation to become familiar with train travel. He sees it every time children come to the museum.

Though it has been years since Hiram had a train station, Pierce thinks the time is right to bring back a piece of the region's past.

"It's in positive shape now. If they wait too long, they could lose it," he said of the rail line. "It seems foolish to me. They've got it. They might as well use it."

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## Reader comments

**hank** of Gray, ME

Apr 9, 2007 8:32 AM

Having lived in Europe, I am fond of train travel; both long distance and the "streetcar" variety. Maine cities are generally congested, with narrow streets and few parking areas. Light rail could relieve a great deal of the congestion they now suffer.

As an example, one drives into the suburbs of Heidelberg in central Germany, parks in a reasonably priced municipal parking lot, then boards the "Strassenbahn" which takes you anywhere you want to go in this long, narrow riverside city. There's even a special train that takes one to the castle on the heights above the city. Much of the city is devoted to pedestrian only areas. Deliveries to stores and restaurants are done at night.

In the Portland area routes more similar to Boston's system could go a long way toward improving traffic AND pollution (electric trains)

Once there was a rail line, my mother called it a trolley, that ran from Boston to at least Waterville, (she went to Colby). I know it ran to Lewiston because I've walked the "Interurban" rail bed through Gray Meadows many times.

Maine's govt. will not take any initiative in this direction - they're too busy devising more ways to empty our wallets.. It will take a citizen initiative.

Just think how nice Gorham would be without all those commuters clogging the town each weekday, or

Gray Center on a summer afternoon.

**Mitch** of Freeport, ME  
Apr 8, 2007 11:38 PM

When Portland and Gorham campuses merged in 1970, there was talk of putting in a train to support the movement of students back and forth, but was rejected because of costs. Sadly, in the long run the bus run has proven far more expensive than outlays for the train, and all that money spent on buses, does not support any infrastructure.

If you look at what the university spends on buses vs. what it could have spent on trains, not to mention that the same line could have supported people commuting into the cities, you can begin to appreciate what a train could have accomplished.

If you have driven through Gorham and waited on routes 202, 114,4, or 25 for any length of time, you might appreciate what a commuter train line there could accomplish.

Sadly, spending millions upon millions on a bypass is the only solution on the table.

**Mitch** of Freeport, ME  
Apr 8, 2007 11:28 PM  
Tim (Weld),

You say trains will never be self supporting, but since when have roads been? They are all taxpayer supported (as are ports, airports, and other transportation infrastructure).

Have you checked into the cost of the Big Dig, and other large highway projects?

By your logic, all roads should be toll roads, including city streets, so they can pay for themselves.

**Mitch** of Freeport, ME  
Apr 8, 2007 11:24 PM  
Tim3,

You say "trains are cool, but their time has come and gone."

I would strongly disagree. I would say they were killed off deliberately by a country enamored with cars, and the development that was built around their use.

I have lived in both Europe and Japan, and I can assure you, trains are thriving elsewhere, and are better and faster than ever. We as a nation have been quite short sighted in not keeping them included in the mix of transportation options.

Our lack of smart urban development and endless sprawl will make life incredibly difficult for the millions of people who live so very far from basic services as fuel becomes more expensive, and ultimately less available.

We have built ourselves into a technological time bomb, and without bold action, many will suffer (and already do), and we have ourselves to blame.

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