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Passenger train service in Waterville an idea to get on board with



By Jennifer Wilder Kierstead lives in Waterville

Years ago, Waterville enjoyed regular passenger train service connecting the Elm City to points south. My husband's grandmother used to board the train in Boston and be picked up at the train station in Waterville, an easy mode of transportation for an older person to reconnect with her family. Passenger service to Waterville ended in 1960.

Maine Rail Group's recent "Maine Passenger Rail Summit" at Thomas College was an eye-opener. I initially attended to check on a form of transportation that could easily bring outdoor enthusiasts to Waterville's premier public park, Quarry Road Trails — to ski on Nordic trails and its Alpine slope in the winter or mountain bike and hike in the summer.

Waterville currently sees thousands of outdoor enthusiasts from points south who drive here, from Brunswick, Portland and other coastal towns that do not have the snowmaking and grooming capacity we are so fortunate to have at Quarry Road Trails. A ski/ bike/rail pass would bring many more recreational tourists, skiers and mountain bikers to Waterville and the central Maine region. But the benefits of passenger rail go far beyond facilitating outdoor recreation and its related economic impact on area lodging and restaurants.

An even more expansive positive economic impact on central Maine could be restored. Waterville already hosts a major intermodal transportation facility with CSX operating the rail yard next to the Kennebec River. Established freight traffic usually precedes successful passenger service, I learned. We have regular freight traffic through Waterville, as all residents know from the occasional traffic back-ups and the haunting sound of train whistles at night.

There are also proven environmental benefits. Amtrak research shows that its rail travel produces up to 83% fewer greenhouse gas emissions than driving and up to 73% fewer emissions than flying. Rail travel saves gasoline and reduces wear and tear on public roads. It's also significantly safer than traveling by car and the ride is undeniably enjoyable rather than stressful. Commuters between Durham, New Hampshire, and Brunswick, Maine, currently log in hours of work while traveling.

New job markets would open up for Waterville residents to points south, including Portland, particularly for the growing number of young people who do not drive or own a car, according to Thomas College student presenters who spent this academic year researching the revival of passenger rail to Waterville. Likewise, local employers could attract employees from a much wider commuting range. Waterville is more well-positioned than many Maine towns to bring back the economic benefits of passenger rail to central Maine. Brunswick saw the light not so long ago. It boasts a vibrant train station, a new hotel and an influx of visitors who boost the local economy. We could do the same by connecting the existing rail between Waterville and Brunswick. This track needs to be preserved for passenger transit and refurbished.

Amazingly, the Maine Department of Transportation is seriously considering ripping up a stretch of track between Brunswick and Gardiner for a temporary bike trail that would benefit relatively few people. Once ripped up, the opportunity for passenger rail disappears, along with all the economic, environmental, safety and sheer-joy-of-traveling benefits. It's entirely possible to plan joint rail/ trail infrastructure. This could be a win-win.

Passenger rail in Maine transports millions of people. That is not an exaggeration. The Downeaster, which connects multiple stations between Boston and Brunswick, served its 10 millionth passenger last December. We're missing out. If we want passenger rail restored to Waterville, we need to strongly advocate for it. The Mid-Maine Chamber of Commerce is in favor of it. It's a rare issue that benefits from bipartisan support.

Let's get on board with the restoration of passenger rail to Waterville (and beyond!) for all kinds of very good reasons. The city is more well-positioned than most to bring back the economic benefits of passenger rail transit. What we need, respectfully, is greater political will among all of us to make it happen. The politics are gnarly but not insurmountable. Let's do it.